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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

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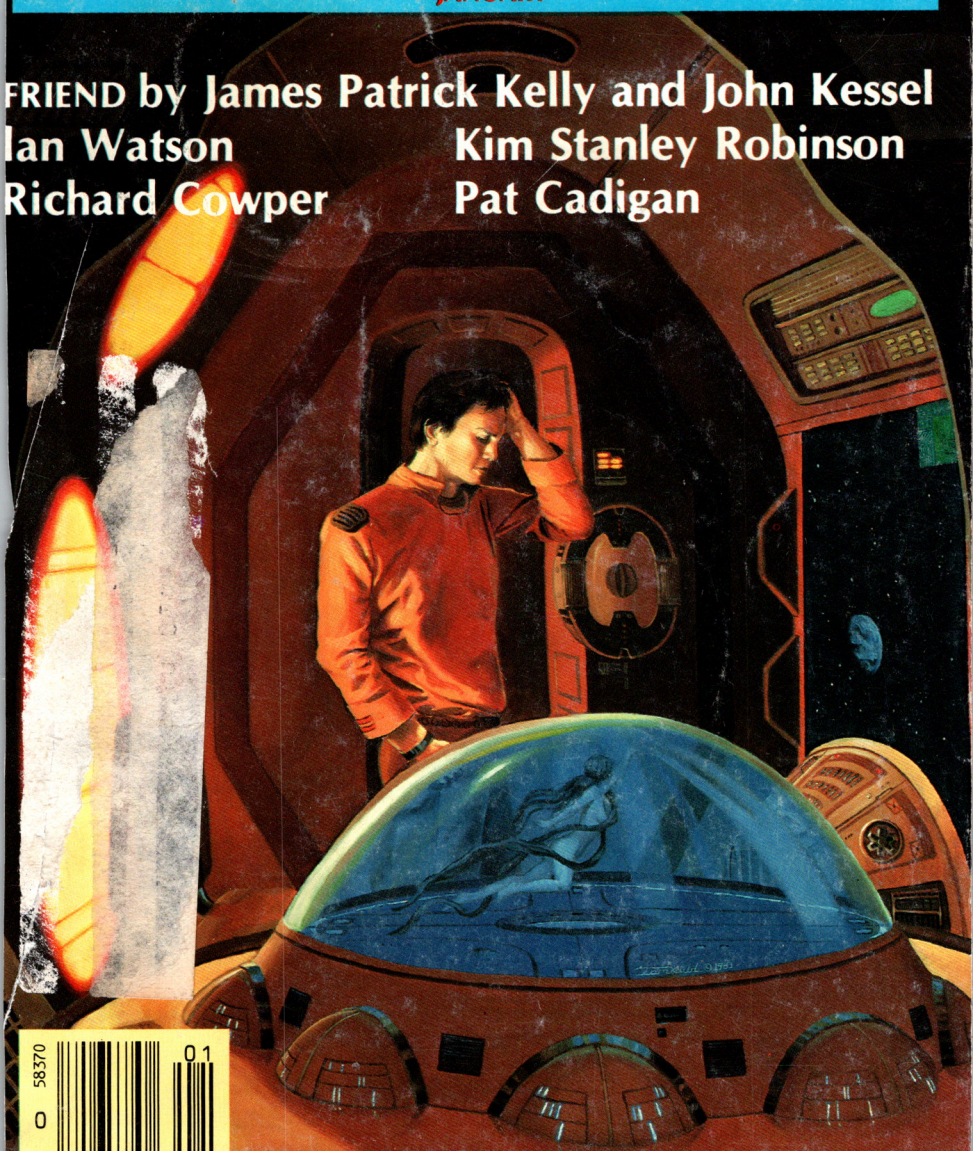
Pat Cadigan



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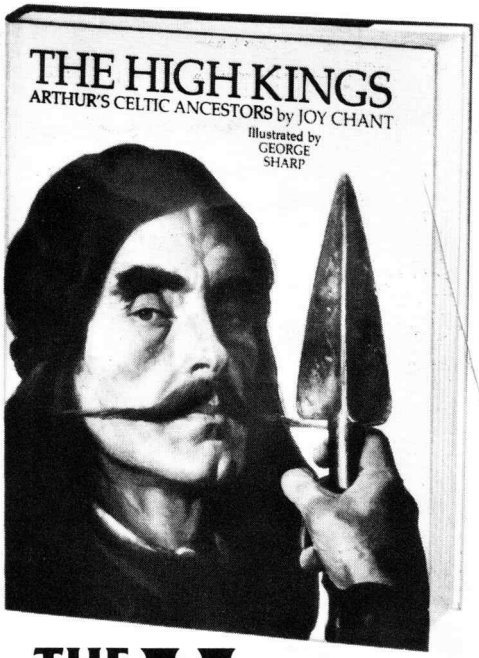

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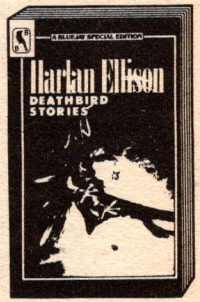

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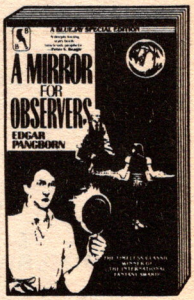

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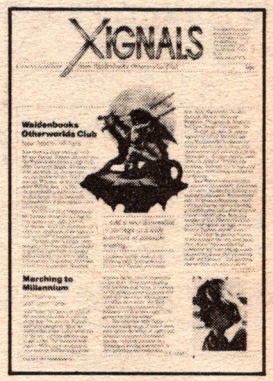

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Jim Kelly's most recent story here was "The Cruelest Month" (June 1983), and John Kessel's was the Nebula award winning "Another Orphan" (September 1982). The two met on an elevator at a Boston convention and have recently done some collaboration. One plus one often work out to be something less than two in such situations, but based on this story and one other in inventory, we offer the opinion that this is one of the rare and happy partnerships that really works wonders.

Friend

BY

JAMES PATRICK KELLY and JOHN KESSEL

When I was a Friend I wore a sleek uniform of gray and blue. In those days the collar was styled high and tight at the neck, fastened across the throat with a gold chain. While the uniform was a sign of great power, the chain also had its symbolism. During a starcrossing, a Friend has sole responsibility for the safety of his passengers; no one, not the ship's crew, its captain, or even the president of IPT may interfere. Once the crossing is done, though, every Friend must answer to the corporation that pays him. I loved putting on that uniform.

The *Le Corbusier* departed Blue, first world of the Farben system, on the nineteenth of Sixmonth, 2251, and was due in Brown orbit on Eightmonth the first. From Brown we would make the ten-month starcrossing to the Sol system and work our way Earthward from Titan. On the insystem hop we had booked our full complement of sixty first-class crossers and about half the second-class space down in the freezers.

I still have the boarding roster for that crossing. Some of the names are familiar; only a few of our trillion-plus citizens are suited by reasons of wealth and temperament to the rigors of a first-class starcrossing. For instance, I had Dr. Fen, the brain specialist; the Roderick Harpers; Brenda Gayfeather, who had tried to vamp me when she was thirteen; the Quills, that most notorious of Cerean group marriages; the journalist Rudi Limin, who later committed one of history's most spectacular suicides, old Simon Bortl, the Kasrash man; and Ori and her bodyguard. There were also nine members of the Imperial Motessier Dance Company in hop from Blue to Brown. All crammed into the living module,

abrading each other like coins in a miser's fist.

It is the Friend's job to keep these coins from losing value in transit. He must be a social director, psychologist, and policeman. The insystem hoppers are the easiest — none are with you longer than a month. All you have to do is keep the hoppers from bothering the starcrossers headed for another system. No hitchhiking. Affairs to be terminated cleanly and without repercussions at the next planetfall. Afterward comes the more subtle task of keeping the starcrossers happy — or at least sane — during a voyage that can last anywhere from eight months to two and a half years. For most of that time the ship is cut off from outside communication by its space-time warp. You try to help the crossers cope with problems caused by the isolation, or by claustrophobia, or sexual misadventure, or most often by the universal arrogance of the rich. If a crosser goes out of control you have a last resort: banishment to second-class passage in the freezers. One out of every twenty stiffs does not survive the thaw. God help if you send the commissar down and he doesn't answer his wake-up call.

There were two others who made that trip. Two old acquaintances, two who were responsible for my great loss. One was Leila Jahiz, at that time the prime dancer with the Motessier. Leila was not a classic beauty; her eyes were too big, her mouth too wide. But she was one of the most striking women I've ever known. And she was an exceptional dancer, perhaps the best I've ever seen. The other crosser was Phillip Goodson. For citizens of the home system, the name alone will suffice. At that time he was still vice-president of IPT and was returning with a contract to develop an industrial spaceport in Blue orbit. Goodson had been senior Friend when I was in training. Some call him a genius. He is a man of great privilege and no honor. I hated him.

Leila and Goodson met for the first time in the *Corbu*'s lounge during the orientation mixer. She and I had been reminiscing; I had known her before I became a Friend. Once I had taken a class from her in free-fall dancing. Conversation bubbled out of her without pause, and at least on the subject of the dance she was fascinating. I was dangerously close to forgetting myself in my pleasure at seeing her again.

Goodson split away from his flock of admirers and favored me with a polite nod on his way to the refreshment terminal. I watched him punch out the code for Soar. He took three caps from the access bin, broke one under his nose and pocketed the others.

Leila noticed that my attention had wandered. She touched my arm and asked to be introduced.

"Phillip," I called. "Have a minute?"

"Hello, Jake." Goodson's handshake was dry and firm. "It's been a long time."

"Phillip, this is Leila Jahiz. Leila is the prime dancer with the Motessier Company."

"I saw you perform last week at the Festival." Goodson took Leila's hand in both of his. "You're a talent, Leila Jahiz. You make the rest of them look like drunks."

"Thank you, Phillip." She leaned forward impulsively and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you noticed me."

Goodson rubbed his cheek with his forefinger, then smiled and touched the finger to his lips. "So. What else can I say that you want to hear?"

"You're on the board of directors of Dance Terra. Tell me about Marl Gustav."

"You know something about me, then?" His features hardened; he looked like a man preparing to do business. "You haven't been getting your information from Jake, I hope."

"I'm a dancer, Phillip. Gustav is the greatest dancer and you know him."

"Hmm. Marl Gustav is an impossible man. Listens to no one. Tries to quit at least once a year. But as you say, he is very good."

"We'd better let you go," I said. "Brenda is watching us as if we were assassins."

Goodson turned his back to me. "Brenda? She's harmless. By the way, Jake, she was telling me that you two are old friends."

"Yes," I said.

"It's been nice meeting you, Philip," said Leila. "You're nothing at all like what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"A stuffy man. Superior. A little of that 'I've-seen-it-all' weariness that all Terran bureaucrats seem to have."

"I try not to believe anything that comes to me secondhand." Goodson popped another Soar under his nose. "You're right about Brenda, however. She looks a little green in this light; perhaps she's ill. I'd better go back; won't you both join us? I'd like to hear more about your dancing, Leila. Will you perform for us?"

"I'm afraid not — my contract. But there's no reason why we couldn't try some free-floating in the pod."

"I'd like that." Goodson slipped an arm around her waist. "Coming, Jake?"

"No."

"A Friend is always on duty," Goodson murmured as he guided Leila away.

After the mixer I retired to my rooms to program dinner and arrange seating. I put the obvious choices at my own table: Goodson between Brenda and Leila, Simon Bortl next to Ori. I knew Ori's bodyguard would be hovering over us the entire meal, testing her food, but there was no way around him. I checked to see how many had signed up for my free-fall dance class after dinner. I tried to handicap Goodman's chances of seducing Leila. In my bedroom, I lay down

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to rest before what promised to be a busy evening.

Because space is at a premium on a starcrosser, the normal sleepers are not much bigger than a groundside closet, about two and a half meters cubed. As the *Corbu's* Friend, I had the luxury of three rooms and a bath with water instead of ultrasonics. I felt comfortable there, and with exception of my bedroom, rarely allowed passengers to invade my private domain.

I was nearly asleep when Leila called and asked if she could stop in. I made an exception for her.

As a practicum before my training as a Friend, I served as a counselor in the free clinic at Chasson University on Brown. Leila was a wreck when she came to the clinic. She was an apprentice with Motessier, the youngest dancer ever to earn that privilege. She was a small-town teenager lost in the city; her nightmares were of crowds and incessant noise. She was having an affair with a callow young dancer whose abilities just barely kept him in the company. Nobody really wanted Leila to be a dancer but Leila; even her lover was full of carping, "constructive" criticism. She was an uneasy combination of egotism and self-doubt. The first time I saw her in the clinic's drab waiting room, all I saw was a nervous girl on the brink of exhaustion. I had no intention of falling in love with her.

A Friend is taught to reserve his feelings — but I was not then a Friend. As a member of the psychology department at Chasson, I was permitted to have human failings. I failed with a vengeance. Perhaps it was that I suffered from some of the same problems as Leila: an excess of talent and a deficiency of self-image. Our first counseling session was intense, and it was only a short step from that intensity to passion. To my credit, I did not forget my responsibilities as a counselor. Our affair made it easier for Leila to end her relationship with the dancer, and the confidence she gained from my support carried over to her work with the Motessier Company. Helping her helped me to decide to become a Friend. When my appointment to the academy came I saw that the best thing for us was to part.

I had followed her career from a distance, but seeing her again in person troubled me. I was not prepared for the strength of the attraction I still felt for her. And I was actually upset by Goodson's interest in Leila.

My musings were interrupted by the door chime. "Thanks for seeing me, Jake." Leila smiled.

"My pleasure." I brought her into my tiny lounge. "What's the problem?"

"No problem, really," Leila said. "I just thought, as an old friend, you might give me your opinion on something. You always were good with advice."

"Certainly. Would you like something to drink? A trank?"

She looked at me queerly. "No,

thank you. Jake, I'm wondering what I should do about my dancing."

I relaxed in my good chair and tried a trank myself. "You looked fine to me on Blue."

"I did, didn't I? That's what I'm coming to realize more and more. I feel better than I've ever felt. Sometimes it's absolutely effortless, yet I know I'm pushing my body as hard as I can; it's like magic when it feels that way. I'm wasting myself in the Motessier. Aren't I?"

"If you feel that way there must be something to it. I've never seen anyone dance better."

"You're an amateur. Still, I think I need to go to Earth. If I'm ever going to make it any bigger than here, I'm going to have to do it soon. I can't dance this well forever."

I could tell what she was leading up to. "Costs credits to get to Earth."

"That's why I came to you. You know IPT. Do you know of any way I can arrange a passage?"

"I would think you could get a sponsor in the system who would put up the money for a second-class passage. And aren't there school and government sponsors on Earth?"

"They're more interested in technical candidates right now. And I don't want to take the chance of being frozen." She looked worried, depressed. "Nothing you could do, Jake?"

I touched her hand. "You really need this so badly?"

She looked me in the eyes for a second. "I'm stuck, huh?"

I had had this same conversation so many times before. "I can't think of anything. It's a question a Friend runs into, and I haven't heard a good answer yet. If you think of a way, I'll help you any way I can."

"You think I ought forget about Earth and stay with the company?"

"It's an excellent company. Goodson even says so. I think you should achieve whatever it's in your power to achieve. That's the way I've always felt about your dancing. And about you."

We both stood. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek.

"Thanks, Jake," she said.

After she left, I sat fingering the chain at my collar. The whole visit was too simpleminded. She wanted something and she hadn't gotten it yet. But at least I had kept my own feelings under control, despite the youthful openness she still had about her.

After dinner there was free-fall dancing in the pod. Of course, this was not the art of a professional dancer, but a simpler recreation well within the abilities of most starcrossers. Leila might disparage it with the slang, "free-floating," but for most, the experience of weightlessness within the crystal walls of the pod is an ecstatic one. Free-fall dancing has been called the purest of the arts of human motion. It is possibly the most expressive act

the body is capable of. To know motion as effortless as thought, to streak through a universe swirling with stars — it is no wonder that even the inexperienced dancer soon becomes addicted.

On the starcrossing, free-fall dancing helps to reduce the claustrophobic anxiety common to passengers. And it is a relatively cheap form of recreation, since a dancepod is required anyway for all IPT long-haul crews according to union contract. But the dance is not an unmixed blessing for the Friend. Midair collisions are common and serious accidents can occur to test his negotiating talents. Once I had to send the Proxian ambassador to the freezer for attacking a clumsy dancer who had accidently kicked his teeth in. Luckily, the thaw was perfect.

I didn't get to dance at all that night. I spent my evening teaching the handful of beginners their basic skills. When it came to the starcrossing, I would need to visit the pod often, but at that point I didn't miss the opportunity much.

Goodson also spent his evening quietly, entertaining his stable of hangers-on. It was obvious now that Brenda and Leila were competing for his attention. I began to worry more and more about Leila's visit to me; it was clear that somewhere in the back of her mind she had the idea of hitchhiking. She didn't seem the type to collect celebrity blowoffs just for the sexual thrill.

Leila danced only once that night; she and Goodson did a popular pattern called the soul-search. Each partner free-forms while keeping eyes locked on the other's face. Well done, it is an attractive exercise. But although technically the two of them danced well, the combination of their styles was jarring. People reveal themselves in their choice and execution of pattern just as surely as they are revealed by their gene maps, their voiceprints, their sexual preferences. It looked like a poor match to me.

After a few hours the party began to break up. I didn't realize that Leila and Goodson had left until I saw Brenda talking to Rudi Limin. It was quite late, and despite the wide-spectrum anti-hi I'd taken, I was feeling the effects of the party. I sat down heavily next to them. Limin was practically stupefied with drugs; he had the face of a statue. Brenda was in only slightly better shape.

"Nice party," she said.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. Limin put his head down on his arms.

Brenda patted him on the head. "That's the way I feel, too."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said. "Things like this happen to me all the time."

"Things like what?"

"You know, to him she's dirt. She's off at Brown, you know. Sure, he can have her now, but will he care when she's gone? I ask you."

I shrugged and smiled. I was in-

clined to agree with her, and saw that part of my job on the insystem hop was going to be keeping Brenda happy. Goodson was proving to be as great a challenge as I'd expected.

Brenda shook her head sadly. "It'll be two months of hell."

I made a quick decision. I put my hand over hers, comfortingly. "Doesn't have to be," I said. "But what you need now is sleep, Brenda. I'm going to close this party soon, anyway."

She was crying now. Tears did not become her.

"Rotten party. Will you come?"

I could join Brenda later, if I decided she needed it. Though a Friend should be impersonal, there were provisions for his fraternization with passengers if it could be justified as therapeutic. Anything in the line of duty. "Brenda—" I hesitated. "Not tonight."

Brenda pushed Limin away from her and got up. "Good night, then," she said curtly.

Limin roused himself from the depths long enough to mumble, "Don't understand, you know. I just don't understand women very well. Otherwise, I'm all right."

I closed the party and headed them all back to their sleepers. Then I took another anti-hi and went to Surveillance to see that they stayed there. First I checked the freezer to see if any of the stiffs were going bad. They were all right that night.

Then I made the rounds through the monitors to see that every sleeper was occupied. They were: our sexual lottery was off to fine start.

I finished my day watching Leila and Goodson blow each other off. I don't remember feeling good or bad about it. It seemed just another part of the job.

Two weeks into the insystem hop the Quills started a civil war. Helen Quill was ejected from her sleeper by the other members of her marriage for riding in the same elevator as Bortl, the billionaire. For reasons that the Cereans are unable or unwilling to explain, this was a serious breach of morals, although Helen was standing in the back of the car and Bortl walked on just as the doors closed. Helen demanded, in her turn, to be off-loaded on Brown to await a starcrossing with more congenial company. This the other Quills forbade. They had carried their argument and a small gallery of spectators to the lounge by the time I heard about it. This was the kind of problem that I loved to handle: the issues may not be clear but the antagonists are, and the Friend must call upon his abilities as a quick study of character, a level-headed thinker, and a mercurial negotiator. I had to threaten to send them all down to the freezer before they would settle down. I told Helen she could make the crossing in the guest sleeper, designed for just such a situation, and persuaded them all to defer any other decisions until we reached Brown. About a week later Helen be-

came lonely, the others relented, and there was a very satisfactory reconciliation.

In the meantime, I had dealt with Brenda's spiteful reaction to the pairing of Goodson and Leila by paying her conspicuous attention in public and visiting her on two separate occasions in her sleeper, making sure that the other passengers were aware of this. As I had expected, Brenda was not so much interested in me as in saving face, and a brief affair with the Friend offered her an acceptable means. I watched for Leila's and Goodson's reactions, but neither seemed to care. As the crossing progressed I was buried under a landslide of opinion, gossip, and pure fabrication about the two of them. The community of crossers is small, and boredom is its greatest enemy.

I was waiting in the lounge before my lunch shift, sprawled in the conversation pit with Ginny Morgan. Ginny was one of the soloists with Leila's company. She was playing the ingenue, dropping unsubtle hints that she was interested in me, since Brenda had apparently proved that I was fair game. I was not above teasing her. She asked me whether the captain would ever call me to account for my crimes.

"The captain is a woman named Alma Fothered," I told her. "Very dour. She wants nothing to do with us. She and the crew stay in the command module. For all they care, you're a sack of grain. There's nothing for them down here but the dancepod."

"Then what do *you* do?"

"I make sure that everybody has a good time."

"Can't people have a good time by themselves?"

"No."

She leaned over to whisper to me. "Jake, is it true that crossings drive some people crazy?"

I winced in infinite pain. She giggled. "The crossings have nothing to do with it. People drive people crazy, and unless you hold up your end of this conversation, you'll be responsible when I go over the edge. You've got me teetering on the brink."

"Ha. Maybe I'll push you," she said impatiently, all of sixteen years old. "Don't change the subject. All my friends who've traveled, they all say the real strain doesn't start until you go FTL, in the actual crossing."

"Believe me, Ginny, the actual crossing isn't any different than this, only longer. You dancers will be offloaded long before you have a chance to go any crazier than you already are."

"Well, some of us will, anyway."

"O.K., I'll bite. What are you talking about?"

"You haven't heard? I thought that Friends were supposed to keep up with all the crossers' gossip."

I could see what was coming and I didn't like it. But I would not let Ginny know what I was thinking. "Let's have a teasing contest, Ginny, just you and

me. I think I'll win."

She gave up without a fight. "Goodson has offered to pay Leila's way to Earth and personally introduce her to Gustav."

"And who started this rumor?"

"I heard it from Leila. I thought IPT didn't allow hitchhiking."

"We don't. When did Leila tell you this?"

"Uhh ... she didn't exactly tell me. I overheard her telling Ottin, the dance master. It's all right with me if she wants to screw her way across the galaxy. As soon as she goes, I'll get a shot at prime."

I smiled at her precious ego. "Tell you what, Ginny. Tonight you sit at my table." I took some pleasure at the momentary look of disappointment that crossed her face.

"I'm more interested in your bed."

She really had no aptitude for polite conversation.

After lunch I went to Surveillance and found Leila in her room. I called her; she did not look guilty. I didn't want to see her in my rooms, so we agreed to meet in the guest sleeper.

Long before IPT monopolized the starcrossing industry, it was the first carrier to ban hitchhiking. The premium on space aboard the ships made it impossible to protect wealthy crossers from insystem hoppers, a small but steady percentage of whom were hitchhikers looking to beg a starcrossing. Hitchhikers have their reasons — some of them quite touching — and they seem to have a knack of picking those crossers most susceptible to their wiles. So IPT banned hitchhiking, mostly to cut down on lawsuits and grab more of the profitable starcrossing market. Other carriers called this elitist. Then the media got into it and everyone knew about hitchhiking. Someone named Bob 46 was the first crazy hitchhiker to blow himself and several bystanding crossers into cold space. Soon another crosser evened things a bit by poisoning an overeager hitchhiker. He was acquitted; the Friend was cashiered. Then came hostage-taking, and then a group of five disgruntled hitchhikers tried to hijack a ship. After that, hitchhiking became a crime almost everywhere; there was a harsh Vagrant Solicitation regulation in IPT's charter.

And still it was a problem.

"You've heard, haven't you?" Leila was full of energy; she almost bounced into the tiny room.

"I've heard a rumor that Goodson has offered to pay your way to Earth."

"Isn't it wonderful, Jake?"

I sat on the all-gravity bed that folded down from the wall. She sat next to me. "Do you seriously think he will do it?" I asked her.

She became more serious. "I'm not a child anymore. I think I can tell when somebody is telling me the truth."

"You realize that even if he does pay your way he's leaving you open to a charge of hitchhiking?" It was difficult for me to be so blunt; it was not my job to be her friend, yet I could not

let her walk into such a situation without giving her the benefit of my knowledge of Goodson. "Once he gets what he wants from you, he could simply turn around and report a violation of the regulation, and you'd be out on your ear at Brown. Subject to civil charges as well."

She was very close; I had not been so close to her in a long time.

"Dear Jake, I know you only want to look out for me. I'll always appreciate what you've done. But I just don't read him that way. He's an IPT exec; he doesn't have to worry about the rules. If he doesn't report me, who would? Ottin says he would make no trouble about my Motessier contract. The other dancers — the women anyway — would only see it as an opportunity for themselves." She paused, and I felt her hand on my back. "Would you report it?"

I turned to her, held her shoulders in my hands so I could look into her face. For some reason I was on the verge of tears. She was too open.

"No," I said.

She embraced me, and I held her tightly, feeling the strength in her arms and mine. She would not leave until she had given herself to me, and I am ashamed to admit that I didn't try to stop her. It was the first time that I ever broke the rules of Friendship. This was not the political coupling that I had had with Brenda: I wanted Leila, my feelings were involved, and for an hour there were no other passengers aboard the *Le Corbusier*.

I lay beside her, listening to her soft breathing. Her body was relaxed, without the taut-wire strength of the dancer I knew her to be. I whispered a plea that she not tell anyone about our meeting. She left some minutes before I did. I knew I was on shaky ground, but it didn't matter. Despite my broken vows, despite the fact that I had lost myself with Leila, as I waited in the darkness until the viewer showed the corridor outside was empty, I can remember feeling nothing but triumph.

I went to Goodson's sleeper and leaned on the call button until he appeared.

"What?" His eyes were bleary and he was wearing a sleepgown. "I'm napping."

"I have to come in, Goodson."

He blinked and stepped out of the doorway. The ceiling shimmered on. Goodson folded up his bed to make room for the two of us on the cushioned deck. He sat cross-legged in front of the computer terminal and gazed blankly at the console.

"So you've heard a rumor?" His voice rasped.

"Is it true?"

"Some are, many aren't."

"Don't play games, Phillip. Hitchhiking is illegal."

Goodson was punching out a code on the keyboard; he miscued and jabbed at the erase button. "Quite right. But this is hardly a case of hitchhiking.

Leila is going to win a grant from Dance Terra. She'll be our visiting artist next year. Don't tell her; I want it to be a surprise."

"Dance Terra? Isn't there supposed to be a competition? And a committee; I know there's a committee."

Goodson smiled. "A committee appointed by the board of directors."

"She'll hate you when she finds out." I felt some dismay — but I had my position to consider. "All right. I won't make trouble over this if you agree to take all responsibility back in IPT City. I just want to be sure of your intentions. But I will say this: if you go through with it, there'll be hell to pay on crossings for years to come. For you especially; you'll be mobbed the moment you board a ship. And think of the press if Leila is a success."

"But no one will know but Leila and I. And of course you, Jake." The computer buzzed, indicating that it had accepted Goodson's program for new clothes. He stripped off the sleepgown and stuffed it into the access bin for recycling. A second buzz; the lid rolled back. Inside the bin was a crisp suit of gray and blue with a gold chain to close the collar.

"I like to wear this once in a while. I get nostalgic for the simpler days when I was a Friend."

I mastered my surprise. "You've already disrupted this passage," I said. "If the others see you in that, you will seriously undermine my authority."

He began to put the suit on. "Your authority ... yes. Is your authority a matter of a uniform?"

"You know, you have a reputation for doing this. You enjoy testing on-duty Friends. I can accept that — as long as you take that uniform off. The uniform is a symbol, and symbols are important. You were a Friend once. I can't believe that it means nothing to you now."

Goodson fastened the chain. "You Friends are all alike. You think you have the most glamorous job in space. Jake, Jake, there's no duty or honor in being a Friend. It's a sham to sweeten the lousiest job in IPT. It means nothing, nothing at all. And I think you know it."

There was a hard silence. My mind raced, trying to catch the realization that had flashed by as he spoke: Goodson was trying too hard. Why would he go to such lengths to make trouble?

"You resent me, don't you Jake?" he continued. "You disliked me years ago, and now, because of this woman, you resent me. Maybe you can hide your feelings from the crossers, but not from another Friend."

"I detest the way you're using Leila to support you own ego. But my feelings are irrelevant. I just need to know what you are going to do about her."

His eyebrows arched. "She's much more important to you than I am, isn't she? More important than your job, perhaps? To me she's nothing; she had nothing to give. That's why I can do what I want with her, for no better

reason than because it pleases me." He turned to the computer and punched out a transfer of funds to IPT Reservations on Brown. Leila's fare had been paid by the Magic Lamp Institute. "My emergency fund," Goodson said.

I rose to go. As I reached the door he directed a parting shot.

"What you really want, old friend, is to blow her off yourself. Isn't that it?"

No, Goodson, I said to myself, I already have. The door slid shut behind me. I retreated to Surveillance and switched on all the monitors. I loathed Goodson. He could not have made things more difficult for me if he had taken this trip to do exactly that. And that was what I realized: the problems were not merely a result of the natural antipathy I felt for Goodson, and his testing was not just the habit that gossip among Friends made it out to be. It had to be a formal test by IPT. Goodson was going to file a report on me when we reached Earth, I was sure, and everything he had done was in the service of that test. Dumping Brenda on me. Wearing the uniform. Defaming Friendship. Seducing Leila into hitchhiking.

And Leila, Leila the fool, was making it even more difficult, despite all the warnings I had given her, by walking right into it.

It would be another week before we reached Brown. Before then Goodson would expect me to file a hitchhiking complaint against Leila. But perhaps I could hold out longer than he, for I couldn't believe he would leave the reservation for Leila on the books as the starcrossing approached and he tired of her. A vice-president would know the importance of the Vagrant Solicitation regulation.

For the next few days I avoided both Goodson and Leila as best I could without giving offense. I was alone with Leila only once; we sat down to lunch by ourselves in the commons. She asked me right away what was bothering me. I would have liked to tell her what a fool Goodson was making of her, how he was not going to keep his promise, but I was too much a Friend. In the corporation's eyes it was none of my business. I did not want to bring my own feelings into the conversation. She couldn't help but know how I felt.

To the passengers I remained the calm Friend, but daily, and later hourly, I was checking IPT Reservations, waiting for Goodson to cancel Leila's booking. From moment to moment I expected the gossip to bring me news that Leila had been rejected by Goodson and was secluded in her room in tears. Instead, on the night before we reached Brown orbit, I heard different news.

It was a well-kept secret right until the last day. The rumors of a public sex display in the dancepod started just as we began the final approach sequence.

Although only a few were invited to attend this spectacle, all were soon discussing it with great anticipation. I had the right to call it off, but no reasons except my own. Public sexual intercourse is an accepted practice on most planets. Nevertheless, despite its acceptance, for most people public sex is something that someone else does.

Goodson himself invited me to attend. When I turned him down he smiled and told me to enjoy it anyway.

It started with Leila dancing. She launched herself from the observation platform at the entrance of the pod. She wore one of those long gossamer gowns designed specifically for free-fall dance. It trailed behind her like the contrail of a flyer knifing through the dusk. She rose to the top of the pod, caromed off a wall, and begin to spin. Her dress was a vortex of white. A streak of it flew off and fluttered across the pod. She broke out of rotation with a flourish and swooped to the opposite wall, leaving another wisp of white behind her.

She played among the floating pieces of her costume, weaving intricate patterns with her body and looking always toward Goodson. Eventually he stood amid scattered applause from the spectators.

I turned them off. I knew they were expecting me to watch, but I fooled them. I let them get whatever satisfaction they could get from one another.

How could I love Leila? I had seen no vulnerability in her face as she waited for Goodson; only coarseness, cheapness, and a stupid refusal to see him for what he was. I still felt sorry for her, but that was not enough. I saw that neither of them would stop until my career was wrecked.

I sat in Surveillance, staring at the dark screen, wondering if the show were still going on. Late, late into the sleep period, I filed a hitchhiking complaint against Leila. I felt as if I had broken the surface of a deep black pond after an eternity of panicky suffocation. I felt released from every constraint. When the monitors showed everyone asleep, I went to the pod and danced my own free-fall dance, alone among the stars.

When we arrived in Brown orbit the next day, there was an urgent message from Reservations. They were submitting a revised exit roster for my confirmation. Jahiz, Leila, SHA223-44-7907, was now on it. I could still have withdrawn the complaint, but I didn't. I simply confirmed and took the message to Goodson's sleeper.

"Jake," he said as the door slid open. "We missed you last night. Come in."

He offered his hand in greeting. I pushed the message into it and stepped past him into the sleeper. He glanced at it, frowned, and tossed it across the little room at me. The sheet fluttered to the deck between us.

"You not going to confirm, are you?"

"I already have."

"Then there's nothing I can do."

"No."

He stood staring, waiting. Suddenly I was very angry.

"Aren't you satisfied yet, you son of a bitch! How can you stand to live with yourself? You say being a Friend is *merde* — but what do you call the kind of work you're doing? Well, I've shown you what a Friend is. I've passed your test."

"Test? What test?"

I wanted to punch his complacent face in. "Don't treat me like a fool, Phillip. You've been testing my performance from the moment we left Blue orbit. Why else would you draw Leila into this hitchhiking attempt? You admitted yourself that you didn't care about her."

He looked at me skeptically, and then his expression changed to something like awe.

"*You* reported her."

"Yes. Of course I did. It's my job."

He sat down on the bed, silent for a moment. When he spoke again, he had regained some of his cynicism. "You're an amazing man, Jake. But if you think this upsets me, you're wrong. There was no test. The deal I offered Leila was on the level. She's an ambitious woman trying to trade sex for an opportunity — for a little consideration. But what you said the other day about this causing trouble for IPT was right. I should have been more discreet.

"You've saved me some embarrassment. Thank you."

I was stunned. "But..."

"Now if you would do me one more favor. I'm sure that you don't want any trouble off-loading passengers, and I'll have to arrange a reconcilation with Brenda. I think you ought to be the one to pass this information on to Leila."

"She'll want to see you."

"Which I will surely refuse to do," he said. "You can explain to her that her misfortune was not my doing. Tell her about this 'test.' "

Everything was crumbling. "You used me just like you used Leila!"

"If you will allow me to make an observation, this problem might not have arisen if you didn't love this woman as much as you do. Very un-Friendlike. And your ego is colossal. To think that I would take the time and trouble to concoct some test just for you. ..."

I couldn't stand it anymore. I hit him and he fell back against the wall. Instead of fighting back, he rubbed his jaw amusedly.

"If I were the Friend on this crossing, I'd put you into the freezer for that."

The members of the Motessier Company were giving Leila a send-off party. I tucked the message into my pocket and joined them. The party had a prickly edge to it, as if everyone were trying to avoid saying the wrong thing.

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ARBOR HOUSE

I drew Leila away on the pretense of some last-minute paper work.

As we walked down the corridor to my suite, I said, "They seem to resent you."

"Yes." She nodded thoughtfully. "I can't understand it, really. I mean, I understand the professional jealousy. They would all love to perform with Dance Terra. But I thought I had at least a few friends in there. I thought they might be happy for me despite themselves." She chuckled humorlessly. "I guess they disapprove of my methods."

We entered my rooms.

"Leila, there's something ... I have bad news for you. You're going to have to off-load with the other dancers on Brown."

She sat down, her face pale but composed.

"I want to see Phillip."

"He doesn't want to see you."

She seemed to shrink a little. "He told me it was all arranged."

"I'm sorry. He had no say in the matter. Your ticket was purchased in violation of the Vagrant Solicitation regulation."

"Hitchhiking? But that means someone had to report me."

I prayed she would let it go at that. "Anyone aboard could have."

"God. Goddamnit! You know who is was? Rudi Limin. He wanted me, I could tell."

"It could have been anyone, Leila."

She seemed dazed. "You said that Phillip didn't want to see me. I don't

understand. How can he not see me?"

"He said no."

"Why?"

"He said you were using him."

"Using him." She looked at me as if she didn't quite understand what I was getting at. "Of course I was using him. I still don't get it. I know he didn't think that I loved him. I told him that."

"Maybe ... maybe he was hurt." I felt empty inside.

She shook her head, and her composure started to break. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes and overflowed. She hunched forward and would not let me see her face.

"Jake. Jake, do you know how old I am?" Her voice was choked. "Twenty-eight. I'm ready now, right now. I wanted to take my chance when it still meant something. This is wrong, so wrong!" She looked up at me. "Please let me see him. He can still do something. He can give me credits for the next crossing."

"He'll humiliate you."

"I don't care about that."

I put my arms around her; her face smelled like tears. "I can't let you do it," I said.

She caught her breath and looked deep within me. I could not be sure then what she had guessed; I still don't know.

The crossing from Brown to Titan was relatively uneventful. Though I chafed under Goodson's unflinching gaze, I did a professional job of managing the affairs of the passengers. It was only when we returned to IPT City that the trouble began, when Goodson reported charges of un-Friendly behavior to the company. I fought the action bitterly, but in the ensuing investigation the suspicions that I had fraternized with the passengers unprofessionally was borne out by an affidavit obtained from Leila on Brown, and a psychoprobe to which I had no choice but to submit. I was cashiered.

I have since then painfully created an entirely new career for myself, forming Brotherhood Incorporated — for I saw that a discipline analogous to Friendship might proved very useful in Earthside industry. Brotherhood has been quite successful. I can now afford to pay for a starcrossing on my own, if I should choose to make one. I do not so choose. I cannot forget.

And Leila ... she finally did make it to Earth. Ten years have gone by, and I don't how she managed it, but she got her chance. She applied and was accepted by Dance Terra — as a member of the *corps de ballet*. She is thirty-eight now, and although she is not the dancer I remember, she is still magnificent.

I went tonight to her first performance. When I saw her dance, weightless within the crystal sphere, I could scarcely bear my loss — of my position as a Friend, I mean.

Books

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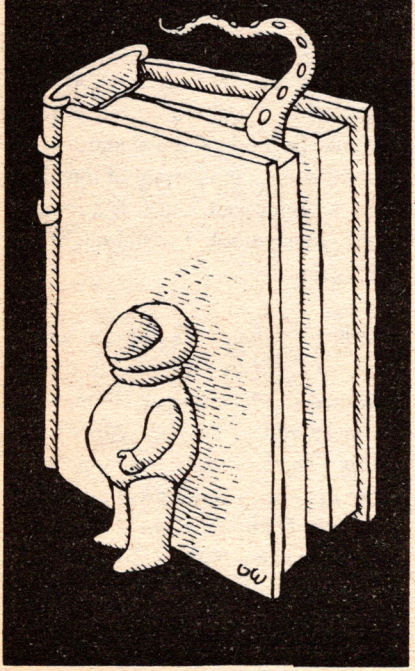

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Castle of The Otter, Gene Wolfe, Ziesing Brothers, Willimantic. Sold Out. Science Fiction Book Club. To be priced.

Tales By Moonlight, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, ed. Robert T. Garcia, Chicago, $15.00.

Nonliterary Influences on Science Fiction, Algis Budrys. Chris Drumm, Polk City, $1.25.

Science Fiction The Future, Second Edition, Dick Allen, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., College Department. No retail price.

We, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Avon, $3.95.

San Diego Lightfoot Sue and Other Stories, Tom Reamy, Ace, $2.95.

Lest Darkness Fall, L. Sprague de Camp, del Rey, $2.50.

There are books that are not produced by giant retailers. Some of them are produced by giant wholesalers (in perhaps the least-known branch of publishing as far as the general public is aware, yet the taxes of the general public are nearly its sole support). There are books that are produced by small retailers. And there are books that are produced by very small retailers. There are also other kinds of books, as for instance club books, and we shall touch on that. But it is the arm of coincidence that has put four of these titles on my desk simultaneously, and in a lengthening but increasingly amenable life, I have learned never to say coincidence Nay.

The Castle of The Otter is subtitled A Book About the Book of The New Sun, and that is what it is. It derives its

title, as faithful readers of these pages know, from a misapprehension. An interviewer asked Gene for the title of the fourth book in the tetralogy of Severian the Torturer, and was told, accurately, *The Citadel of The Autarch.* But that is not what the interviewer heard, or what he put in his notes; or subsequently reported to his readers. So Gene, a gentleman to the core, decided to cover up for the fellow's gaffe.

I cannot think of a more characteristic way for the small-press book to come into being. Neither, apparently, could the Ziesing Brothers, of 768 Main Street, Willimantic, Connecticut, 06226. And so, in due course, they produced this elegant Smythe-sewn, cloth-bound, spine-stamped, dust-jacketed book of about 120 cream-papered pages, in a total run of 520 copies. You can't have one. They sold for $16.95 unsigned, $25.00 autographed, and they were all ordered-out in advance of publication date.

BUT, you will be able to get another edition, from the Science Fiction Book Club. I don't at this writing know the price, the format, or anything else about it. But I do know the content, oh yes, and I commend it to you.

It is a book not just about a book, but about books, and literacy, It begins its main text with an *apologia pro vita librorum:*

> There was a time when I could put the palm of my hand flat on the front of a tattered paperback called *The Dying Earth* and feel the magic seeping through the cardboard: Turjan of Miir, Liane the Wayfarer, T'sais, Chun the Unavoidable. Nobody I knew had so much as heard of that book, but I knew it was the finest book in the world.
>
> In the first volume of *The Book of the New Sun,* the old librarian, Master Ultan, says, "Such a child eventually discovers, on some low but obscure shelf, *The Book of Gold.* You have never seen this book, and you will never see it, being past the age at which it is met."
>
> "It must be very beautiful," says Severian.
>
> "It is indeed. Unless my memory betrays me, the cover is of black buckram, considerably faded at the spine. Several of the signatures are coming out, and certain of the plates have been taken. But it is a remarkably lovely book. I wish I might find it again..."

Master Ultan's description of his *Book of Gold* in no way fits the appearance of the original Hillman Paperbacks edition of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth,* which circumstances made in effect a small-press book contrived by Damon Knight. It sounds a little more like a 1936 *Robinson Crusoe* with Wyeth illustrations, tell you the truth, but you would know better for yourself than I. And, in all modesty,

Wolfe considers the possibility that for some, *The Book of Gold* may well resemble *The Book of The New Sun.*

It may be; on some low shelf, some obscure shelf, where the fascinated child may sit in peace for hours, irrevocably swimming into the currents of her or his future, from the vantage of that stream to regard the banks of the world with eyes that have already gazed beyond the hills.

I did not know I love books so much. I thought I just did them, as no doubt some of you think you just read them. Wolfe finds us out, however.

Well, there are chapters here on Helioscope and Sun of Helioscope, on Words Weird and Wonderful (to satisfy those who pondered over Wolfe's vocabulary; on Onomastics, the Study of Names. There are others called These are the Jokes and The Rewards of Authorship, and there are more. There is an extensive bibliography by Gordon Benson, Jr., and while we're mentioning positive contributions to the book, let it be noted the Stephen Fabian two-color jacket drawing is exactly — *exactly* in the right style.

I hope the Book Club Edition sells a million copies. It won't; it will set some sort of record, I'm sure, but there aren't a million of us.

Tales By Moonlight is an anthology of original horror-fantasy fiction, published by a Chicago fan and edited by someone who habitually ignores the nice distinctions some make between the amateur and the professional of SF. It, too, is a remarkably well-produced book, with an effective and excellently rendered full-color painting on the dust jacket; in short, it doesn't look like a small-press book, except that where you usually see Doubleday or St. Martin's or Putnam, you see Garcia. (But in much smaller-size type than the big fellows use, probably because Garcia doesn't want bookstore browsers to realize it until they're past the checkout counter.)

Garcia is, to be exact:

Robert T. Garcia, Publisher
P.O. Box 41714
Chicago, IL 60641

and he is sitting somewhere in the night on which I write this, well aware that he mortgaged the house, the car, the cat and his collection in order to go out there and compete, on the thin edge, on the same turf where the dinosaurs can live for a decade just on what spills out of the jaws of other dinosaurs.

It's a good book. There is, if you care, an introduction by Stephen King. That's for the straights at the shelves of Crown and B. Dalton; the fact that it's also a rather pleasant and to some degree helpful essay is irrelevant.

There are interior illustrations by a variety of artists. Those are all rather nice, and put one in mind of the fact that as far back as one can remember, small-press publishers in this field have felt their books were incomplete without them.

There are perceptive, sometimes

over-fond but always interesting introductory notes by editor Salmonson, who is making a career of not letting die out the tradition of the author who writes one or two stories a year, clearly just because. That is a commendable career.

And there are the stories, some by authors familiar to F&SF readers, some not: Dale Donaldson, Jeffrey Lant, Richard Lee-Fulgham, George Florance-Guthridge, Austelle Pool, Jody Scott, Phyllis Ann Karr, Janet Fox, N.K. Hoffman (who is Nina Hoffman, the very promising newcomer whose manuscripts still carry several variant bylines), Gordon Linzner. Eileen Gunn, Steve Rasnic Tem (the poet, and editor of the *Umbral Anthology of Science Fiction Poetry*),* Mary Ann Allen, Elinor Busby, William H. Green, Bruce McDonald, John D. Berry, and Linda Thornton. They range from outright horror — some of it wrenchingly effective, as in Busby's "The Night of the Red, Red Moon," or Florance-Guthridge's "See the Station Master" — to the gentle fantasy of the two Karr stories about the toymaker, Torin. Some are, indeed, better than others.

But the whole book glows with a sense that all these participants here are engaged in an enterprise of love for something, of respect for things found on obscure but low shelves. And, certainly, there are stories here you will not forget. *A Book of Gold*? Perhaps; perhaps for someone. I will tell you this: I have seen many a big-press anthology that attempted to emulate the genuine feeling that rises from these pages; i.e., there must be something precious in it, that they should be so assiduous in attempting to debase it.

Nonliterary Influences on Science Fiction is a long essay about more or less that kind of thing. It goes into extended detail on the attitude of commercial publishers towards words, stories, and authors; the resulting editorial practices, the footprints these essentially mechanical interventions have left through the texts of countless stories published before, particularly during, but also since the heyday of the pulp-magazine publishing chains, and many other useful facts.

It was written because I had discovered to my amazement that not everyone knew what a widow-killer was and that some had never heard of High John the Conqueror Root. There was also the matter of reading scholarly evaluations of mid-century SF which totally failed to take into account the set of realities that had produced those texts.

So, at the behest of Gary K. Wolfe, editing a book of essays for the Science Fiction Research Association, I did this piece, and in due course the publisher intervened in the text of it so heavily

**$5.25 postpaid, in trade paper, from Tem at 2330 Irving Street, Denver, CO 80211. Reportedly excellent, but I know my limitations and don't review poetry.*

that I publicly repudiated the version published in that book.

Didn't have much choice. Too many mis-statements and plausible but error-creating typographical errors had been edited into it.

So now, for scholars and for those who might be curious as to what the fight was about, here it is, every word as originally written — barring a few noncrucial typos — from Chris Drumm, P.O. Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226.

I warn you to put on your strong reading glasses. This is a chapbook in the veriest meaning of the term; 22 4" x 7" pages in teeny-tiny photoreduced typewriting. $1.25 postpaid, which is cheap for the information. *The Book of Gold,* however, it is not. Sturdy corrugated iron is more like it, with just a hint of rust blooming in the channels.

There are few science fiction teaching texts. Most instructors adapt from anthologies or from scholarly compilations originally intended to be supplemental reading of some sort. In effect, most SF teachers at most levels have to write their own texts, which is nearly impossible to do well. No one — not even Your Humble Servant, here, who is hard at work on his own text — knows sufficiently much about sufficiently much of the scope of this field to be able to cover it evenhandedly on his or her feet.

For this reason, Dick Allen's *Science Fiction The Future* has enjoyed considerable popularity. Written to accommodate the needs of teaching to lower-year college undergraduates but sufficiently flexible to range well to either side of that bracket, this has been one of the major texts since 1971. Just introduced now is this second edition, which has been considerably revised.

Allen — his name is Richard Allen, but not even on a textbook does he use it — builds his book around stories and essays, by major writers of fiction within and outside of newsstand SF, and by major commentators on SF and the things of SF; technology, the future, and so forth. Among contributors are James Dickey, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Harlan Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, E.M. Forster, Susan Sontag, and even me (with my review, from these pages, of Julian May's *The Many-Colored Land).*

The mortar between these bricks is Allen's commentary, his purposeful summation of themes and trends, and the felicity with which he quickly equips his reader with a working vocabulary of SF terms and concepts.

I had at first no idea of reviewing this book; only a few of you are in a position to buy it. But some of you are, and you, in turn, are in a position to put people in contact with it. They are a little old for low shelves, true, and this is not, after all, the sort of book in which one takes pleasure — Heaven forfend that someone should chuckle in delight or stare in growing surmise

at the material on the pages of a *textbook*, for God's sake! — and yet ... and yet....

Speaking of things delightful, let me call your attention to three recent reprints of uncommon attraction:

One is Avon's new edition of the Mirra Ginsburg 1972 translation of Evgenii Zamyatin's *We.** They call it "A Masterpiece of the Future," by which presumably they mean something other than a reference to its being a masterpiece of the 1920s. Zamyatin, a man in and out of political hot water all his life, was bitterly and outrageously driven out of Soviet Russia by his fellow writers. Josef Stalin took pity on him and permitted him to exile himself in Paris where he died in 1937. The names of his detractors are presumably recorded somewhere, but are, I believe, lost to literature.

Zamyatin said his major literary inspiration was H.G. Wells. His most avid pupil was Ayn Rand, who, some say, carried "inspiration" to an uncommon extreme in reflecting Zamyatin's influence on her first major work, the novel *Anthem*. In any case, there can be little doubt where George Orwell and Aldous Huxley did their homework for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*. I couldn't honestly say they significantly improved upon the model of *We*, except in that they were shrewd enough to work in English.

This is, then, the classical novel of the rigid society and the almost unwilling revolt of one of its citizens. Funny as well as smart, sensual, and at times poetic in a way that escaped both the grim Orwell and the too-clever Huxley, the Zamyatin emerges with all these qualities enhanced when one compares the Ginsburg translation to others.

We, though written in Russian, was first published in English, in 1924, in a translation by Gregory Zilboorg, I am told in Magill's *Survey of Science Fiction Literature*. Subsequent versions were also conditioned by Zamyatin's political troubles, one being passed off as a translation *into* Russian from Czech. (Ibid.) For whatever reason, it has inherited the same tradition of wooden literality that also haunts Jules Verne in English. Or it had, until Ginsburg got her hands on it.

She also furnishes a scholarly introduction, and it, I fear, is too much impressed with the gravity of her project. But the translation itself limns colors plain and conveys its intelligences not only in words but in the rhythms of words; the sentences paint, and dance, and sing. They fly. If you have ever read *We* in any other translation, consider the possibility you haven't read it.

And then there is *San Diego Lightfoot Sue and Other Stories*, by the late and possibly very long-lived Tom Reamy. This collection, first created by Earthlight, Publishers, of Kansas

**Avon calls him Yevgeny. It's a matter of opinion.*

City, Mo., is now available at popular prices for the great racksize bookbuying public. F&SF readers of "Twilla," "The Detweiler Boy," "Insects in Amber," and the title story, will recall what an uncommon talent Reamy possessed. In addition, various essays on Reamy in this book draw an excellent picture of a quintessential small-press artisan who happened, by the grace of things that go right, to break into "the big time" for a little while. He may or may not have been happy there, but he has left us much to marvel at.

And, finally, del Rey has reprinted L. Sprague DeCamp's marvelous *Lest Darkness Fall*, an alternate-world story in the sense that when Martin Padway goes back in time to the last days of Roman supremacy in the west, he does — being a man of scholarship, intelligence, wit, and rationality; i.e., being a lot like his author — change the course of civilization's decline into the dark ages.

It's a good book. Maybe the best DeCamp ever wrote, and, curiously, it debuted as a novella in *Unknown* magazine in 1939, rather than in *Astounding Science Fiction*. Perhaps John Campbell, editor of both, felt it would have needed more hardware in its time-travel. But for whatever reason, it then appeared as a mavericky sort of book. The publisher was Henry Holt & Company, certainly a big enough straightforward commercial outfit. But the year was 1941, and if this wasn't the first such venture by a commercial house, it was certainly one of the very first. Publishing material originally found in one of those trashy science fiction pulps! Imagine the daring of that; the trepidation, the life raft stored, ready to pop into buoyant downriver escape, waiting under the innovative editor's desk.

God knows what happened to him or her. God knows what happened that mightn't have happened in some 1941 of Martin Padway's universe rather than ours. But it was a worthy thing to do, and that's what all these books have been. Most books are, of course.

Gregg Keizer lives in North Carolina, where he works as an editor on computer publications and writes SF, some of which has been published in Omni *and* Asimov's. *He writes that he learned to love mountains when he lived in Utah, and he dedicates this first-rate SF thriller to everyone who climbs, whether up or down.*

Unlike Cortez

BY
GREGG KEIZER

We lost Margaret the second day when she was on an icy ledge. She was swallowed by the clouds below and barely had time to scream.

The ropes and pitons were encrusted with crystals then, and later, as we sat inside the blister that protected us, and huddled around the small stove that brewed our tea, Swann blamed her death on the equipment. I didn't want to argue with Swann, even though I knew he was wrong. She had not fallen from the face because of rigid rope, or clumsy pitons. She'd fallen because she'd heard songs.

Margaret had talked incessantly of the creatures we knew were at the foot of the mountain. But as she'd shouted that she heard songs rising from the canyons below, she had screamed, for in her surprise at the sounds coming over her earplugs, she had slipped. At least that was how it seemed to me.

That night, inside the silvered blister, listening to the winds tear at the unbreachable fabric, Swann and I needed to hear the songs. Margaret had taken the crash the worst, even at times talking of suicide. Anything was better than being stranded, she'd said. We needed to hear the songs, to reassure ourselves that she had not stepped off the ledge purposefully, but in shock at the sounds. Even Swann, who in his love for Margaret had chosen himself as point in the attack on her sanity, had wanted to hear for a brief moment. But there were only winds, and the rasp of crystals and fine grit on the three corners of the triangular shelter. Neither of us heard the songs she'd sworn had risen from the valley still over five kilometers below.

"Belay," Swann called, and I tightened my grip on the icy rope, braced

my legs, and wedged my feet deeper into the shallow crevice that ran in the ledge from the sheer wall to the drop.

"On," I shouted, though I needn't have, for the helmet radio picked up the merest whisper. Yet, both of us continued to scream into the microphones, thinking that the wind outside our helmets somehow prevented words from being heard. All I could see was the line of rope running straight for the edge, its tauntness making it rasp against the crystals that covered the rock. The rope across my back and shoulders tightened, and dug further into my suit. Swann was descending, for I could feel the rope jerk and wave. He was climbing down the mountain, searching for purchase when he could, slipping several feet at a time when he fell — until the slack in the rope vanished and it banged him flat against the rock.

We were climbing down the mountain, both of us. Three of us yesterday. I remembered too vividly the image of Margaret seemingly leaping from that ledge. The mountain didn't even have a name. We'd barely had time to name the world it squatted on before we had smashed our shuttle on the peak. *Cortez*, we'd called the planet, after a name deep in Margaret's family.

We'd been lucky to crash on the topmost peak in the hemisphere; if we'd landed on a lower elevation, we might not have lasted more than a few days, the length of our suits' air supplies. The combination of the planet's mass and distance from its sun provided for a strange atmosphere. Earth-like enough to breathe, it was dense; a pressure of five atmospheres at sea level the instruments had read as we'd orbited in the *Shars*. Too thick to breathe without equipment. We'd eventually succumb to oxygen poisoning or nitrogen narcosis if we had to inhale the planet's air. Except at the higher elevations, where the pressure was less. So when the shuttle's hull split, only breathable air rushed in. The shuttle had buried itself in the side of a snow-covered spur at seventy-six hundred meters, the pressure there only a bit over an atmosphere and a half.

Perhaps it would have been best if we'd plunged toward the plains instead, for if the shuttle had crashed on the rocks below, it might have burst its fuel tanks and caught fire. The starship's sensors would have noticed that. Some of us might have lived through the flames if we'd been quick. But with the shuttle buried under an avalanche of snow, its communications smashed, there was little chance the starship above would find us. The *Shars* wouldn't search forever for us; it had a survey schedule to keep, and the loss of a single spotter team like us was acceptable. It would try to find us, I knew, but with no wreckage visible, with the metal of our shuttle disguised by the tons of ore in the mountain it rested on, and with no way for us to signal, the prospect of rescue was slim.

A week, perhaps ten days, and the *Shars* would have to leave the orbit, and us.

A day after we'd smashed into the snow, the signals started from below the mountain. Regular and repetitive, they came in on the infrared detection equipment, which had somehow survived the crash. English had been switching power from the instruments in an attempt to fire what was left of the shuttle's fuel, hoping to draw attention to its sudden novalike flare, when she noticed the pulses on the infrared. The signals started in one direction — the south, we decided — and worked their way around the base of the mountain. Unfortunately, the shuttle's computers were jammed into a bulkhead, and there was no way to decipher the signals, which repeated every eight minutes.

We gave up trying to explode the fuel; nothing we did produced enough heat to ignite it. Instead, we climbed toward the signals below. They had to originate with the intelligent life the *Shars* had detected from orbit. Perhaps it was intelligent enough to help us.

My thoughts returned to the sound of Swann's voice. "David!" A pause, then the sounds of breathing and of hands scrabbling on ice. "Falling," he said loudly into his helmet radio, a trace of surprise coming through. The rope slid through my hands and creased into my back as Swann fell. I pulled up on the rope, feeling it dig into my suit before it slowed, then stopped, bouncing crazily as its elasticity shortened it. I knew what Swann was doing, even though I couldn't see his movements. He was frantically pounding another piton into the rock, clipping the small metal carabiner to it, then slinging the rope through the metal loop, perhaps tugging on it sharply to test it. Another link in the chain of pitons that followed us down the mountain.

"Swann? Are you all right?" I watched the taut rope move slowly to the left. At first all I could hear was his breathing.

"Fine, David. Slipped five meters," Swann said finally. He was breathing hard, probably trying to draw the already too-dense air deeper into his lungs.

"Are you tied in yet?" I forced the thick air through my mouth.

Swann grunted something that I took for assent. I moved slowly, trying to steady myself against the constant gale, until I faced the rock. Looping the rope through the carabiner attached to the piton in front of me, I backed up, letting the rope tighten in front of me slightly. I jumped backward and rappelled down the wall.

It was simple, this leaping, feeling the soles of my boots slam into the rock, the springing in my knees as I pushed off and leaped again. The rope spun in my hands as it rushed through my fingers, slowed only when I closed my hand tight and let the friction build. There was no danger now,

only exhilaration.

And then I leaped one last time and almost jumped on Swann's shoulders. He moved, and so did I, and I touched down beside him on the jutting edge. It was wide, this one, wider than any we'd come across so far. I couldn't see its edge in the swirls of the crystals outside my helmet visor.

"Have you heard from the others?" Swann asked, his voice raspy over the static in my helmet. I shook my head, then wondered if he saw the movement in the dim light. "I've switched to their frequency, but there's nothing on it now." I noticed that Swann's hands trembled as he coiled and uncoiled a stretch of rope. Was he that afraid?

I tongued the small switch in my helmet and listened to the white noise roar out at me. I licked the switch again and again, but there was nothing on any of them. Back to Swann's frequency. "Where are they?" I barely saw his shoulders move and he shrugged.

Swann, Margaret, and I had been the only ones of the team with any mountaineering experience, so the others had stayed with the wreck of the shuttle, hoping that the *Shars* would somehow spot them.

"What do we do?" I asked, still too loud.

"Go back," Swann said. He had been distant since Margaret had died, but I wasn't ready for this.

"I'm cold," I said after a moment. It was foolish, for the suit was working perfectly, but still I shivered inside its bulk. English, Haas, and Sussen had the shuttle wreckage to huddle inside, and for a moment, I almost agreed with Swann.

Swann wiped the crystals from his visor. It would not make it easier to see in the slow, steady wind. "I'm going back up," he said. "Maybe the ship found them and they're leaving."

"Don't be stupid. They'd get word to us before they'd think of leaving."

"I'm going up," he said again.

"If the ship finds them, they'll signal us," I said. "They probably shut it down to save power." Swann walked to the rock face and looked up. "Swann" I asked, grabbing his arm. He swung at me then, slamming his hand into my helmet.

"This is crazy! There's nothing down there but more clouds," he screamed. I was on my back, staring at his visor. My helmet was still intact, for there was no sudden cold rush of air.

Nitrogen narcosis? We were at fifty-seven hundred meters, and the pressure was not yet two atmospheres. The intoxication effects of the nitrogen should not have shown until we were down another three thousand meters or so. And the symptoms were all wrong; he should have been gleeful and eager to stay, not afraid and violent.

I reached up and touched Swann's shoulder, and he didn't strike me this time. "We need to start the rebreath-

ers," I said, pointing to the tank on his back. A helium-oxygen mix, the air was scrubbed of carbon dioxide and returned to the system. The tank would give us ninety-five hours.

"David...." Swann started, but then was silent. There was no need to tell me of his sudden fear; it was too easy to see. Neither was there need to talk of Margaret's death, or the chance the others would abandon us if the *Shars* found them. He nodded his massive helmet, helped me to my feet, and walked toward the edge, disappearing quickly in the swirls of icelike crystals. I was too tired to call after him to watch carefully for the ledge's end. Instead, I leaned heavily against the rock wall. Even through my suit, I could feel the knobs and angles of the rock as it dug into my back. My tongue flicked over the frequency switch again, searching for some sound besides static while I thought.

I'd climbed enough to know what had happened. Swann had reached that moment, that horror-filled moment every climber comes to. Swann had slipped, fallen no farther than he had scores of times before, and had realized that he could die on the mountain. He'd lost his edge, that strange fearlessness of the ice and ledgeless rock, and if he ever found it again, it would not be today.

It would be dangerous climbing down with Swann now. He would be cautious, afraid to take the tiny risks we'd taken since we'd left the shuttle. And if he reacted in fear in a moment of crisis, he would probably panic, and kill me, too. But to turn back would admit that we would die on this world; the *Shars* might leave orbit in one day, or five.

Then, as my tongue found another movement in the frequency switch, I found voices. Not English, Haas, or Sussen. Not on a radio band, but on the exterior channel, the outside microphone picking up something low-pitched but clear. The songs that Margaret had died for.

My mouth was open and I was ready to call to Swann when I stopped. Instead, I listened to the strangely grating song, the melody hidden beneath rasps and gravel-toned sounds that fit some unknown pattern. I tried to pinpoint the direction, but with the clouds around me, it was useless. At first, I thought they were coming nearer, and suddenly feared that they might be hostile. Margaret had carried our one weapon, and it had fallen with her. But the longer I listened, the more I thought the sounds made sense. It was as if my own mind were placing words and thoughts to fit the song. *We wait,* the melody seemed to sing.

I shook my head and again almost called to Swann, but then the sounds lilted one last time and were silent. If he didn't think me insane, as he had thought Margaret, he would at the very least be reminded of her. Perhaps he would even feel the panic of fear again if I told him I heard songs from

the creatures signaling from below. It would be simpler to say nothing.

But I did wonder at the songs that had run through my ears. The signals from below and the songs came from the same source; of that I was sure. The voices could be kilometers away, and still we would hear them, for the sound waves would carry far in the dense air of this world. Were they waiting for us? It was foolish to believe that, I decided; the thoughts were only my wishes for rescue. But as the memories of the song continued, I kept hearing the words I'd placed in its melody. *We wait.* Not too long, I thought, for the *Shars* could not remain above forever.

Seventy hours left, the rebreather tank readout signed as I pushed it. Another twenty hours before we would have to turn back for the shuttle. I bent into the steady wind and glanced over my shoulder to Swann. I led now — had been leading for the last several hours — but he often allowed too much slack in the rope that tied us together, so I had to look to convince myself that he was always there.

The glacier field stretched before us another few meters, and behind us for what seemed like kilometers, though I knew it had been only a four-hour hike. The winds had abated somewhat as we'd descended, and they had cleared away the clouds that had surrounded us since we'd climbed down from the shuttle's wreck. Even though there were still clouds obscuring the foothills of the mountain, I could see for kilometers. The short-cropped vegetation that began at the edge of the glacier field before us was almost bluish in the light. The shadows far below were sharply lined, and the glare from the ice beneath my feet and the clouds beneath the mountain was such that I considered snapping another filter over my visor. The nearest peak looked to be at least twenty kilometers to the west, and it jutted from the lower cloud base, as the one we descended did. I dared a glance at the sun, but couldn't face the brightness, for though the sun was small, it was only slightly diminished by the thin clouds still left.

The shuttle was somewhere above us, hidden by the high cloud cover and the spur that interrupted my line of sight. It seemed impossible that we had come this far. How would we be able to climb back to the peak? Already my body thummed to the pain of carrying the extra weight this planet's gravity gave it. And we had done nothing but climb *down*.

Suddenly, I felt the ice beneath my feet shift almost imperceptibly, and turned to warn Swann. Without thinking, I leaped to my left, trailing rope behind me, fumbling at the same time with the ice hammer tied to my waist.

From the corner of my eye I saw Swann slide into the crevasse that had begun to open under my feet, but that

I'd managed to escape. The only sound was the hiss of ice on fabric that I heard through my earplugs. The noise was coming from Swann's helmet microphone.

Finally the ice hammer was in my hands, ripped free of its scabbard, and jammed into the crust now beneath my helmet visor, for I was on my belly. I closed my eyes and hoped the hammer would bite enough to hold us, listened to the hiss in my ears, and knew we both would die.

I almost felt the impact I heard over my earplugs, even exhaled in sympathy as I heard Swann's breath squeezed from him as he struck something in the darkness of the crevasse. the rope twitched a moment along my thigh, and then was still.

"Swann? Swann, can you answer?" Nothing. I looked around and spotted an outcropping of rock, its blackness marbled with something that looked like pyrite. Gently, I crawled toward the rock, scraping my crampon-tied boots one at a time in the ice so that if tension suddenly came on the rope, I would at least have some purchase to hold Swann. I might have spared myself the trouble, for I reached the outcropping without incident, and with rope to spare. Pounding a piton and hooking a carabiner to it took only a moment, and then the rope was secure. If Swann fell farther, he would be safe.

I had to turn on my lamp to see him when I reached the lip of the crevasse and peered over. He was down at least six meters, wedged headfirst into the bottom of the ice fault. His helmet was invisible, buried in the ice his fall had scraped from the crevasse walls. Small chunks shifted and fell on his rebreather tank, clanging loudly even through my helmet. He was twisted hard in the crevasse, and I knew I could never free him by myself.

My tongue flicked at the radio switch and upped the gain on the band we used. At first there was only more static, but then I heard Swann's breathing, its sound raspy as he drew unsteadily on the rebreather.

"Swann?" I shone the light as near his helmet as I could. "Swann?"

His breathing altered, became smoother in the few moments before he answered. "David?"

"Here, Swann. Above you."

"I can't move, David," he said. "I think my arm is broken." He paused. "I smell atmosphere, too."

I moved the light so that it shone where his arm should be. It wasn't visible, and seemed to be tucked under his body. I noticed his rope was twisted around him several times, bound tightly, it appeared, around his leg before it rose up to meet me.

"Can you get me out?" Swann asked, his voice soft in my ears. I waited too long without replying, and Swann coughed once, then twice. "Just wanted to check, David." He paused. "I can't see much. The visor is crammed against the wall in front of me. I think it's shattered. The re-

breather is still working," he said, his words slurred slightly.

I still couldn't think of what to say to him.

"I'm going to try to shift to my left," he said, and I waited while he breathed deeply several times, then grunted as he tried to move. In my light, I saw his body bow, his legs move a centimeter or so, but his shoulders remained still. The only thing I could think of was his calmness, the monotone of his voice that came over my earplugs. What a strange time to regain one's élan, I thought, remembering his hysterics three thousand meters up the mountain.

The crevasse was too narrow to do more than fall into, for though it was at least two meters wide where I was, there was barely a shoulder's width where Swann lay. If I did go down into the crevasse, there would be no room to swing my ice hammer, no way to chip him free.

"David? David? Don't leave. David?" Swann nearly screamed into his microphone. Again his words were slurry.

"Stay still," I said, "I'm not going anywhere." All the while I thought of how I could make enough room to free Swann. Deep within, I almost hoped I would not think of something, for I knew I did not want to climb into that hole. The constant noise of ice skittering down onto Swann's tank was reason enough. But I did think of something, for my hands touched the three flares tied to the edges of my air tank.

They were only signal flares — in case we became separated, Margaret had said when she'd forced me to take them. They would make a little heat, perhaps enough to melt some of the ice around Swann's shoulders.

"Swann?" I asked, but heard only his breathing in my earplugs. It was ragged, and too fast. "Swann!"

I ran to the rock outcrop and snapped another carabiner into the piton, pulled my rope from my shoulder and looped it through. I was back at the edge of the crevasse in a moment, the flare already free and in my hand, its end too bright to even glance at. Again I called to Swann, and again there was no answer. I thought I caught a low moan, but I wasn't sure. Leaning back on the rope, I lowered a foot into the crevasse and kicked the ice crampon in. That foot secure, I repeated the movement slowly, pausing twice to catch my breath. It would do no good to panic and fall along with Swann.

Then I was above him, leaning hard on the rope and twisting so that I half-hovered over him. The flare filled the crevasse with harsh light, and even through my helmet I could hear it sputter as it ate itself. "Swann, listen to me. I'm going to try to get you loose. I've got a flare and I'm going to use it near your shoulder. If you can move your hands, try to cover your face. Swann?" Definitely a moan this time as answer, then a string of muttered

words. Random sounds. They might as well have been part of the songs I had heard yesterday.

If I stretched far to my right, and twisted so that my hips hurt, I could touch the end of the flare against the ice and snow at Swann's shoulder. For a second, the flare almost went out, but it returned suddenly, what little heat it gave off steaming the ice in small clouds. Every few moments I had to straighten out, claw with my cramponed boots for purchase in the crevasse wall, and then twirl to return the flare to Swann's shoulder. I talked to him all the while, even when I faced the wall. I talked of the *Shars*, of the others with the shuttle far above us, even of the creatures below that would certainly help us. I spoke of Margaret, hoping Swann would talk to me, but he only moaned deep in his throat.

The ice cracked and splintered and came off in large pieces from the crevasse's walls, but Swann was still wedged into the gap at the bottom. The ice melted very little, but the snow around his helmet disappeared in a few minutes from the slight heat. The ice and snow beneath Swann's helmet were reddish brown, and when I dared to look closely at his visor, I could see the crack in it, and the fault in his skull, too.

Somehow I climbed out of the crevasse, sat on the lip of the hole, and stared down into the valley. When I noticed that the butt of the flare still burned in my hands, I threw it far from me, hoping it would clear the glacier field and fall all the way down. Of course it didn't, and instead fell only ten meters away. What good were signal flares to someone who climbed alone? I thought, my tongue pushing the radio gain to maximum, but I didn't hear Swann mutter, or even breathe. He was dead.

I sat in the snow and ice for a long while, screaming at the valley, swearing long, complex strings of words that no one heard. At least they kept me from weeping.

But when I swore a last lungful, my tongue touched the frequency switch, and the exterior microphone came on in my earplugs. While I stared at the still-bright flare, I listened to the booming songs that I'd heard before. Not exactly the same, though the melody was identical. Only the words that my mind jammed into the melody had altered. *We come*, the song seemed to say now. And then I stared into the distance, looking down the mountain's slope toward the valley. Rising up were clouds of brown balloons, small twisting things dangling beneath each, I could see. The songs came from the creatures soaring up the ridge thermals. These were the intelligent beings who had sent us signals. Balloons. I started to laugh.

For a moment, they hovered above the burning flare, spread wide in a ragged circle. They were silent now, their

songs gone, and though I flicked up the volume, I heard nothing but the hiss of the static in my ears.

The rough envelopes of their gas chambers seemed close enough to touch, even though they were over ten meters from me. Sausage-shaped, a meter in length, a third in diameter, they bobbed slowly in the air currents. Closer, they recalled the vast Zeppelins, the cargo airships on Old Earth, though on a smaller scale. They had to lift with hydrogen, I thought. Some body chemistry within them must manufacture the gas, perhaps breaking down water gathered from the air.

The score of thin loops that hung below the gas envelopes were fingerless, but they looked agile enough to grasp. One creature seemed to be carrying something like small rocks in two of the tendrils.

A sputtering came through my earplugs, and as I listened, I watched them settle to the ice ten meters from me. Releasing gas, I thought. As they clumsily bounced on the glacier, hauling themselves along by gripping the surface with their dangling limbs, they closed the circle and converged on the still-burning flare. Soon they were upon it, and as they moved nearer to the light, their movements became more animated.

It looked like a dance. They swayed in place, moved slowly to the right, then the left as their envelopes slapped against each other. Several of them moved more quickly, and the brown skin of their envelopes rippled with some hidden effort. The skin bulged gently in one place, then another, as if they were forcing gas into inner chambers.

I stepped back as the songs commenced again. This time they were loud and insistent. While I watched the creatures' envelopes move as the sounds poured from them, I placed a word in the melody. *Die*, it was, and suddenly I was afraid. I was weaponless, and even though I'd been on spotter teams for three years, I had never had to play the game of First Contact before. That had been Margaret's job, but she had gotten herself killed.

Two of the creatures scrabbled from their circle and moved toward me. One carried the small stones — razor-edged, I could see. My feet were only a meter or so from the crevasse and Swann's body, and I could retreat no farther. I fought the bindings and freed another flare, holding it in front of me, like a sick man's cane. The creatures stopped, seemed to face one another, and the rocks clicked as the left one's tendrils brought them together. A spark glanced toward the ice. The tendrils moved again, and again a spark flew, this time upward, toward the orifice in the center of the other's clumps of dangling loops. The creature burst into a mass of flame.

The heat was enough to steam the glacier in front of me, enough to scorch my suit. I must have flicked a thicker filter down without thinking, for when

I forced my eyes open, I had to slip the filter aside to see clearly.

A thin streamer fluttered to the ice, the only remaining fragment of the balloon creature. Except for a thin cloud of soot-tinted condensation in the cold air, there was not even any smoke from the explosion. The creature had destroyed itself completely. Now I knew the source of the signals on the infrared from the valley floor.

I watched the other creatures — *Zepps*, my mind had already called them — as they pressed even closer toward me. My exterior microphone was still on, and the songs came through clearly. Now they were more melodious, much of the grating undertones gone, more volume at the upper edge of the scale.

Die, the song still seemed to whisper, and I saw in my mind the image of Swann's broken face, and I wanted to be sick. The Zepps bounced forward, their gas envelopes jostling my legs and thighs. The word of their song washed over me again, and wildly I struck the flare's tip and heard it sputter to life.

"Get away!" I yelled over my helmet microphone, hearing the sounds pour from my exterior speaker in the helmet's temple. I swept the flare in front of me and to the side, watching the arc of its afterimage. A Zepp suddenly burst, and orange heat reached for me, but I stepped aside. Another Zepp died, then another, as they seemed to lurch forward toward the light and heat at the flare's end. I threw the flare down, buried it in the ice, and listened to it crackle. But the wail of the Zepps' song keened louder, and they moved closer, not away, as they sang. *Die, We die.* And then, as they gathered around me, their three dead only wisps of soot on the ice, as they danced beside me, the thoughts became whole. The Zepps danced and burst into fire for me in supplication. The melody of their song was clear now. Its tone was one of worship.

We wait, We come, We die, the song had spoken, it seemed, and the fragments fit. The Zepps had begun their signaling after the shuttle had crashed, had lured us down here. Not to attack us, as we'd thought, but to praise us. Perhaps the falling shuttle had traced a light across their sky, and they knew we were on their world. They could not rise to meet us — their gas envelopes looked stretched tight already at three thousand meters, and they would not be able to hold enough gas to generate the needed lift. So they brought us down, brought their gods down from the mountain.

That was what I was to them, I realized. Fire was their mortality, and I could use it without dying. Immortal, and a god to them. I sat back on my haunches, fingers trailing in the snow.

An idea came, and I flicked my tongue against the frequency switch until the displays read correctly. Then, speaking softly into my helmet microphone, I heard my voice from the ex-

terior speaker. "Hello," was all I could think of the say. The songs fell quiet as I repeated my greeting, adding my name for some reason. *This is stupid; they're not understanding any of this,* I thought. As soon as my words were gone, the air was full of their sounds again. A god, and I could not talk to them.

I laughed. The sounds boomed from my exterior speaker, and the Zepps were silent again. I couldn't stop laughing. We had climbed down the mountain, searching for the source of the signals, expecting intelligence that might be capable of aiding us, of helping us return to the *Shars,* when all the while there were only these creatures waiting to worship us. They were no more able to help us — to help me — than I would be to help them soar to the peak of the mountain. They were certainly no space-faring race, certainly not advanced enough to create machines. For if they could, why, then, would they still use their own bodies to drift in the winds, or their own deaths for signals?

I walked away from them then, and stared into the crevasse that entombed Swann. Perhaps if he or Margaret were alive, we could make sense of the songs, perhaps even converse after a fashion. I didn't even want to try.

The disappointment was bitter. I would have to climb back to the shuttle's wreckage without help. Then my disappointment changed to anger, and I turned and shouted at the Zepps, venting my sudden hatred for them, for the promise of assistance their signals had foolishly provided. I reached for the nearest thing, and my hand closed around my ice hammer, still tied to my waist.

I hesitated. It would do no good to kill more of them. Nothing could change the fact that they could not help me, or the others on the mountaintop.

I started coiling the rope that still lay on the ice, and made ready for the long climb up to English, Haas, and Sussen. I would have to leave Swann. Silently, I wished him well.

And almost fell into the crevasse as something bumped against my legs.

Turning, I saw three of the creatures rise from the ice, only to hover over the crevasse for a moment before they drifted down into the darkness. I knelt down and turned my lamp on their brown gas envelopes as the Zepps squeezed one by one into the crevasse. Gradually, they settled toward the bottom, where Swann lay, and with tendrils flicking from one side of the enclosure to the other, they explored his body.

They sang, high-pitched and wildly, and then two floated slowly to the surface. The third remained, released more gas, and wrapped itself around Swann, its gas envelope toward the ice. I glanced away from the crevasse, and saw the Zepp near me swing its tendrils together. Sparks flew down into the crevasse.

Another Zepp surrounded me then, half-smothering me in its yielding envelope as it pushed me away from the crevasse. Even though my exterior microphone was shut down, I felt the explosion through my boots as it fractured the ice. The Zepp collapsed on top of me, and screaming, I fought my way free, swinging my arms wildly at the creature's bulk.

"Swann!" I yelled as I crawled to the edge of the crevasse and tried to see through the steam and streamers of smoke from the torched creature. I found my lamp and flashed it into the crevasse. Gradually, the steam cleared as it cooled and condensed into crystals. Through the snowfall, I made out Swann's form. His suit was blackened, and he was lying in the crevasse at a different angle than before. No wonder, I thought, seeing the huge cavity in the wall of the crevasse, from where the flame had fired itself. Shards of ice slid down onto Swann. He was still dead, I had to remind myself, even though he was free.

I lay watching without comprehending as two Zepps rose and floated over my shoulder, then descended again into the crevasse. I watched as their tendrils wrapped around Swann, and lifted him clear of the ice that partially covered one side of his body. I switched on the exterior mike, but the creatures weren't singing. They were silent as the two deposited Swann on the ice beside me. It was almost as if he were their offering to me. Their tendrils released him and he rolled to face me. His suit was scorched and his visor was curled at the edge of the split in it; the plastic had melted somewhat. Thankfully, the visor was soot-covered, and I did not have to look at his bloodied face again.

"What do you want?" I said over the exterior speaker, but the Zepps failed to sing a response. "Why did you bring him up?" Again no answer. "Why didn't you come when he was still alive? Why couldn't you have been here then?" The Zepps only weaved slowly in some sort of dance again. Stupid, ignorant creatures, I thought.

One butted against Swann's suit and slid tendrils around Swann's leg. Angrily, I brushed the thing off, swearing at it. The Zepp tried again, this time probing and tapping at Swann's visor with the tips of its tendrils. Again I threw them aside from Swann's corpse. Another creature edged beside me and thrust two tendrils into the split in Swann's visor. I could see the visor crack as the Zepp found some leverage.

"Get away!" I screamed, struggling for my ice hammer, wanting to plunge it into the Zepp's vibrating mass in front of my face. Again the tendrils moved, and the visor fell away in halves. It reminded me of nothing more than fruit falling from its pit. Swann's eyes stared at me, a large wound running down the middle of his face. I reached out and palmed his eyelids shut. For a moment, my gloved

hand lingered on his face, and my loneliness flooded through me.

The Zepps were insistent in their examination of Swann. More and more crowded around him, forcing their brown limbs into his helmet. They were respectful in their movements, as if they were touching him with great deference. As if they would do anything for him.

An idea came to me quickly, and though I shuddered at the first touch of it, I knew it was right. It was the way off this planet. I shrank from its horror for a moment, but then I reached for the openings to Swann's suit. I prayed softly that he would forgive me.

Breathing hard, I slipped back against the rock until I sat on the ledge, my feet splayed in front of me. Clipping myself into the piton I'd just pounded into the rock, I fingered the rope that stretched over the ledge and down into the swirls of snow. Still sitting, for the load was not heavy, I pulled on the rope, feeling its end bump and turn. First the empty helmet, then the shoulders, then the torso of Swann's suit appeared as I pulled it up. Carelessly, I dragged it from the lip and toward me, hearing it grind on the ice and rock. My rebreather tank was discarded, left the day before on a ledge when I found I could do without it again, and I inhaled the thinned air at seven thousand meters without much difficulty. I propped the suit against the rock wall and watched as tendrils fluttered from the open helmet.

I was almost to the shuttle; another six hundred meters above me it waited. I wasn't sure of English, Haas, or Sussen, for I'd not been able to raise them, even though I had tried every hour during the last three days it had taken me to climb this far. If I hadn't had to drag Swann's suit behind me, I would be there already, but there would have been no reason to return to the shuttle if it had not been for the suit and its occupants.

I watched the suit shift, and wondered how the four Zepps crammed inside it were faring. The creatures were surprisingly small when completely deflated, one in each leg, two in the suit's chest.

I'd stuffed one into the suit once I'd pulled Swann from it, but the other three had slithered in on their own. I remembered the hiss of gas as they released it from their envelopes to fit into the suit. I could only hope that they could generate more gas when I got them to the shuttle's wreckage.

What would they do if they suspected what I planned for them? And how would I feel when I went through with my plan? The Zepps were intelligent, and using them would be murder. I'd killed three already, but not in cold blood. I was supposed to search for intelligence, not destroy it. But if I hesitated, I would die on this world. I did not want to do that.

And they thought me a god, I rationalized. Doesn't a god demand sacrifice? I thought again of the planet's namesake and of the stories of his conquests on Earth long ago. Cortez had been taken for a god, and had murdered the native people. Was I so different?

I reached for Swann's suit, slung it over my shoulder, still surprised at its lightness, and left the ropes, pitons, and jummars on the rock ledge. The rest of the climb was easy enough; nothing technical from here to the shuttle. I stared up the mountain and began to walk up the ridgeline toward the spur where the shuttle lay under the snow.

Not until I calmed down was I able to look a second time at the sweep of the avalanche that had buried the camp that English, Haas, and Sussen had set up at the base of a ridge. They had moved from the wreckage of the shuttle, which still showed to the left of the churned snow. The three probably decided that searchers would find them more easily if they were out in the open, not huddling in the wreck under its covering of snow.

That was why the radio had fallen silent. English, Haas, and Sussen had been dead four days. I had no inclination even to dig for them, knowing what I would find. Swann's face was memory enough.

I walked to the shuttle, feeling the Zepps follow. Three had crawled from Swann's suit as soon as I'd reached the small plateau. The fourth was unmoving near the bottom of one leg, its gas envelope wrinkled in deep folds. I decided it was dead. The others had sung immediately at freedom, and I noticed that they had turned toward the small disk of the sun, as if they basked in its rays, cold at this altitude.

Before I reached the wreck, I felt my boots sink into the snow, and I stopped, afraid that another crevasse would widen beneath me. After my heart had stopped thumping in my throat, I looked down, and saw that the snow was only a thin layer over a pitchlike jelly spread across the area. Shuttle fuel. English and the others must have emptied the tanks and thrown the fuel here in their attempts to ignite it. I saw the butts of several flares off to one side, more thrust into the fuel. They had not been hot enough.

The Zepps would be, I thought, looking again at them. They moved gently in the dance I'd seen before. I suddenly did not wish them harm, and knew I could not set them afire to ignite the fuel to signal the *Shars*. They were intelligent; they had in fact demonstrated that over and over. I was their god, and responsible. I could not be their Cortez. I felt released from the burden I'd carried up the mountainside, and I wanted to laugh.

I moved away from the shuttle and its spilled fuel, and sat in the snow off to one side of the avalanche's crusty

path. The *Shars* was likely gone by now, on its way to the next planet for survey. I counted the days on my fingers, and reached ten. It probably would have done no good to kill the Zepps even if English, Haas, and Sussen were alive.

I switched to the exterior mike and listened to the now-familiar songs of the Zepps. They moved past me, one brushing against my shoulder, and toward the shuttle. Again I imagined that there were words to fit the song. *Farewell* was all that came to mind, something that fit my mood perfectly, I thought. Farewell to the *Shars*. Farewell to my companions.

The explosion took me by surprise. Instinctively, I turned toward its sound, but the blast flung me to the ice and I felt my suit pocketed by debris. The roar from the exterior mike peaked, and then died suddenly as the sensors in the system dampened the noise. I curled around my knees and waited for the pattering of rock and ice to end.

When I dared look over toward the shuttle's wreckage, the column of smoke from the burning fuel was already a hundred meters in the air and soaring fast. The Zepps were nowhere to be seen, and I knew immediately what had happened. They had torched themselves, setting the fuel on fire all in the same moment. They had done to themselves what I had not been able to force myself to do.

The smoke lofted by the steady wind streamed toward the west. A better beacon I couldn't have made. If the *Shars* was still in orbit, it would sense the fire's sudden heat, and if a shuttle was sent to investigate, the column of smoke would guide it to me. There was nothing to do but wait and feel wonder at the Zepp's sacrifice.

The crew of the shuttle whispered among themselves as the ship rose to dock with the *Shars*. On the shuttle's infrared equipment there were sudden indications of scattered signal fires on the planet's surface. The blazes stretched in an arc around the mountain they'd found me on. Strangely timed, they said to each other, letting me overhear. The fires were regular and patterned. Perhaps someone should investigate, they said, and looked at me.

I said nothing, only looked at the rear screens to watch the planet's surface disappear in general clouds. I had the feeling that the conflagration spreading from the mountain's flanks was in celebration. At what?

There would be questions aboard the *Shars*, questions about the planet and about what had happened. I would tell them what I could, and they would say I'd been lucky, that I was a survivor, a survey team member. I would tell them that I'd killed three of the creatures, that more had died before I was rescued, and they would only look at me with bewilderment, wondering why I bothered to care. You

had to murder to survive, they'd think, and perhaps even say.

What had I done for them that they had died for me? Come down from the mountain with a light in my hands? Brought them to the peak, where they could never had gone without my help? For that they died?

As the shuttle's engines altered thrust, there was a moment when the sound was as a song: grating and low-pitched. The images of the Zepps rising to meet me on the glacier returned, and then the memory of Swann's empty suit.

Farewell, their final song had whispered to me on the plateau. I heard the words again and again, and as I looked to the infrared screen, and saw the circles of their sacrifices, I realized I had been only a god to them, something they had been waiting for. A hand-held flame extended from the mountain, a journey to the cloudless peak where the sun burned on them. *Farewell,* the words sang; and I understood.

If we were to return in our shuttles, we would be only another form of life. Perhaps intelligent in their minds, perhaps not. But we would bring tools, and machines, and language computers that would allow us to talk with them. We would be their Cortez, and murder the faith and legends of their god.

A god should come only once. I would have to make sure we didn't return to Cortez. "No, there's nothing down there," I finally said to the crew who waited. "Nothing worth the time."

"I only hope we never have to use it."

Drop your sword, pull up a stool by the fire, and listen to the crazy stuff the young people are up to these days...

Executives and Elevators

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

The air was bright now, and the boy and girl made swift progress through the forest of glowing blue bones. Suddenly both moons and all the stars went out. The pathway began to throb, and a hungry panting filled the air around them. Then all was back to normal in an instant.

"Balbaranza's at it again," the girl observed.

"Are you sure, Denal?" said the boy, Ux, in a deep, slow voice.

She nodded confidently. "That's Balbaranza's style. She loves celestial manifestations."

A hail of teardrops began to fall around them, clattering in a thin music against the bones of the forest. Denal and Ux pulled up their hoods and huddled together, arms around each other's waists. The hail faltered and turned to a light drizzle of sighs, then stopped altogether. The ground was dry.

"That was Trilligask's work, wasn't it?" Ux asked.

"I think so. He does a lot of weather."

"Does he really work for the Assassins' League, Denal? My father thinks he does."

"Your father's a swordsman. What would he know about sorcerers, or the Assassins' League?"

"Just because your family are thieves, you think all swordsmen are dumb. My father's pretty smart. He held the Lifestone right in his hands, and nobody else ever did that," said Ux.

"Yes, but he lost it again," Denal pointed out.

"He was attacked by the Nine Bronze Men! He fought them off and probably saved your father and the others. You shouldn't always be making fun of swordsmen., Denal."

The girl reached up, put her arms lightly around Ux's thick neck, and drew his head down. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him long and tenderly. "I'm only teasing, Ux. You know I'm very fond of you. We make a good team," she said, caressing his cheek.

"You're the best thief in the Borderlands, Denal. And the prettiest anywhere," said Ux, mollified.

"Thank you, Ux. That's sweet. Now we'd better—"

She stopped abruptly at a slithering sound from deep in the forest of bones. Ux, baring his teeth, stepped before her and drew his sword, Doomdancer. Denal laid a hand on his corded forearm and whispered, "No, Ux, we mustn't fight the Skulkers. We'll hide until they pass."

Ux reluctantly followed her to a heap of fallen bones, where they crouched until the misty forms of a clutch of giant Skulkers oozed past on either side. Back on the path, they hurried to their destination, the house of Gazog, a student wizard and the leader of their band. Just beyond the snapping, snarling mouths that opened in the ground, emitting foul carrion breath and hungry slurping noises, they saw the lights of Gazog's steep-roofed house.

As they closed the gate behind them, they heard a long, low hiss. A huge angular head rose up before them, higher than the rooftree, and the light glinted off orange scales and yellow fangs.

"It's all right, Zaloom, we're friends. Denal and Ux. You remember us, Zaloom," said the girl in her gentlest voice.

The dragon lowered its head to nuzzle her, and she scratched it just behind the earholes. It rumbled with pleasure, like wind wuthering in a chimney.

Gazog greeted them at the door, looking his most wizardly. He wore a soft black robe, belted with a black cord. His boots were black, and a ring with a black stone glistened on his left hand. His hair and short beard were black, as were his eyes. His boyish face was thin, and very pale.

"It's good to see you both!" he said heartily, embracing Denal and thumping Ux and his massive shoulder. "It's great to back with the old team again."

"How long will you be home?" Ux asked.

"Right through the Darkfire holidays. I need a good rest."

"Is school that hard?" asked Denal.

"It's murderous. Scarcely a minute to ourselves. About the only chance we have to relax ... well, that's what I want to tell you about. Come in. The others are all here," said Gazog, guiding them into the main room, where three guests sat by the fireside.

The newcomers exchanged greetings with the other members of their band. Reeaa, the elf-warrior, laid her cool hand on their foreheads in welcome. Lepp, the blind holy man, smiled and waved at the sound of their

voices, and the scholar Shreen nodded. When they were all seated comfortably, and provided with fine dark ale, Gazog stepped before the fireplace and clapped his hands for attention.

"I've invited you here first of all because it's good to see the old band together again. We've gone on some exciting quests in our youthful days," he said.

"And we will go on many more," said Lepp.

"Indeed we will. But right now, we deserved some fun and some relaxation. So I want to introduce you to a new game I learned at school."

"Game?" Ux repeated uncomfortably. He was not good at games, and avoided them when possible.

"You'll like this one, Ux," the young wizard assured him. "Lots of action in it."

"What's it called?" asked Lepp.

"The name of the game is Executives and Elevators. We call it E&E, for short."

Reeaa giggled, with the sound of crystal bells in a soft breeze. Denal and Ux exchanged a glance.

"What does that mean?" Denal asked.

"It refers to the world of the game. It's a fantasy, you understand, all a made-up world. We cast dice, and we each assume a role in this fantasy world, and then we set out on our quest," Gazog explained.

"Do we have to make believe we're somebody else?" Ux asked, perplexed.

"That's right. There are fascinating characters, and each one has special powers—"

"But I don't want to be anyone else."

"It's only pretending, Ux. You might be ... oh, for example, you could be Larry, the Investment Counselor. You'd have the ability to fill people with the fear of death and accidents. You could make them do whatever you want — unless they have the power of Sales Resistance, of course."

"I can do those things now, with Doomdancer."

"What are some of the other characters, Gazog?" asked Shreen.

"There's J. Foster Wellington III, the Attorney; and the Assistant to the President, Ms. Chase ... Jack, the Public Relations Man ... and Debbie from the Secretarial Pool, a very challenging role. They're the chief characters in the scenario I've worked out. Since I know something about the game, I thought I'd act as Personnel Manager. That's what you call the one who directs things," Gazog replied.

Lepp turned to their host and asked, "Do these characters have special powers, like the Investment Counselor?"

"Oh, yes. The Attorney can issue subpoenas, and sue, and appeal. He has the gift of writing in a way that no one but another Attorney can decipher. Ms. Chase can make men helpless with fear simply by appearing in their offices. With just a few words,

she can summon up an army of warrior women."

"Wow," said Denal.

"The Public Relations Man has the Power of the Media behind him," Gazog went on. "He can cloud the issue so no one understands what's really going on until it's too late. And Debbie from the Secretarial Pool knows everything that people want to keep hidden and can type a hundred and eight words a minute, besides."

"It sounds good to me," said Lepp.

"Me, too," said Reeaa. "How do we play?"

"I'd better explain the game a bit. You see, it's a quest, just like we've gone on so many times, only we're after something different. We're a little band of employees and middle management who are out to penetrate to the Executive Suite of International Flange and Gasket Corporation and seize control of the entire operation. There's going to be a proxy fight—"

"I don't know what a proxy is, but I'll fight it," Ux broke in cheerfully.

"No, you don't fight the proxies. you fight *for* proxies," Gazog explained.

"For them, against them ... I don't care, as long as I get to fight," Ux said amicably, smiling at his comrades.

"Is that all we do? Just go to this sweet place and fight for proxies? It doesn't sound very exciting to me," said Shreen.

"It's not all that easy, Shreen. It can be very complicated, and it's quite unpredictable. Sometimes, at school, a game will go on for a whole weekend. You see, there are perils along the way. The characters have weaknesses."

"Like what?" Reeaa asked brightly.

"Well, the Attorney can be disbarred. The Public Relations Man can lose his credibility."

"What about Ms. Chase? Has she a weakness?" Denal asked.

"About the only thing that stops Ms. Chase is for all the male characters to gang up on her. Even that doesn't always work," Gazog told her.

"Wow," Denal said softly.

"I think you'd all learn a lot faster if we tried playing. I've worked out a plan of the International Flange and Gasket Corporation's head office. There are guards, and alarms, and hidden cameras ... and other precautions. Why don't you throw the dice for characters?" Gazog asked, smiling and holding out the dice.

"Can't I just be me and use Doomdancer?" Ux asked plaintively.

Denal hugged him and said, "Come on, Ux, let's try it. It sounds like fun."

Ux did as she asked — he generally did as Denal asked — and the game of Executives and Elevators began. The friends played well into the night, until they had penetrated to the doors of the Executive Washroom. By this time, Larry the Investment Counselor had been nailed for embezzlement (Ux, who was playing as Larry, had no idea what the word meant, and kept asking why he couldn't just hack his way out

of it), and Denal, as Ms. Chase, drafted by a group of concerned citizens to run for Governor.

Ux was quiet as he and Denal walked home. The bone forest had become a jungle of crystals, clittering and tinkling with their own inner energies, brightening the night with their inward glow. There were nine small red moons in the sky now, and the stars had drawn into a single sinuous ribbon directly over their heads.

"The sorcerers have been busy tonight," Denal said.

Ux grunted in response. A night-shrieker whizzed along the ground, darting from side to side as it gave off its blood-chilling cries. Ux caught it with a kick and sent it flying into a patch of groan-grass, where its landing caused a great outburst of lugubrious sound.

"You're in a sour mood," Denal observed dryly. "Didn't you have a good time? Everyone else did."

"I don't like Executives and Elevators, Denal."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," said Ux. He was not handy with words, and when Denal only looked at him curiously, wanting an answer, he sighed and did his best. "I guess I just don't like to make believe I'm somebody else. I like being me, and I want you to be you, and all the others to be whoever they are. It's just nicer that way. Why should I want to be a make-believe person in a make-believe world?"

Denal slipped her arm through his and smiled up at him affectionately. "You're sweet, Ux, but you don't have any imagination at all," she said.

"I guess I don't."

Overhead, the moons had popped one by one, and the fragments were falling in a gentle snow. It came down softly around the couple, in great pink flakes with the faces of cherubs, and as it fell it filled the air with laughter and sweet song. A flake landed on Ux's sleeve. He watched with childlike intentness as it melted away and its laughter faded into silence.

"You liked that, didn't you?" she asked.

"I did, Denal. That was pretty."

She squeezed his arm and sighed, shaking her head fondly and patiently. "I don't know what I'm going to do about you, Ux," she said.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, not quite certain what he had done to be sorry for, but not wanting to disappoint Denal.

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Ux. It's just the way you are."

"How am I?"

"I'm afraid you're a hopeless realist," she said. The laughing pink faces fell thickly around them; the stars began to pulsate in a wild kaleidoscope of twinkling color, and the crystal forest rang in tune with the rhythm of the stars. Denal sighed once again, and said, "You're just completely satisfied with everyday reality, Ux. No sense of fantasy at all."

Richard Cowper's new story takes place at a time when space travel is ancient history...

The Scent of Silverdill

BY
RICHARD COWPER

Everything that's worth having you carry around inside you — memories, dreams, feelings. The rest is just a load of useless, worrying junk — stuff you pile up over the years like a dung beetle piles up its ball of crap. You're better off without it.

When I was your age — twelve, thirteenish — I was always hanging around the old Port. It was a ghost place even then — I'm talking about the middle sixties now, you understand? — though in those days there was a group of huts stuck away in a corner where a couple of men carried on a repair business. Polatski their name was. They had it painted up on the roof of one of the sheds. POLATSKI BROS. REPAIR WORK OF ALL KINDS. For months I though their name was "Polatskibros" — all one word. Sometimes they had another man in to help — an old man — well, he seemed old to me then because he had white hair. The Polatskis called him "Captain." I think he did respraying mostly.

Not that I was much interested in the Polatskis, or in the Captain, either, come to that. It was the place itself that drew me. What you might call the lure of ancient history. I used to wriggle in through a doghole under the ten-foot-high fence and wander around looking at things — touching them, wondering about them, trying to imagine what it had been like in its heyday all those years ago. Touching something — actually putting your hand on it and *feeling* it — is altogether different from reading about it in a book. You can really relate yourself to it. Standing there fingering the blast-crazed concrete rim of a rocket silo while I stared up through the elder and sycamore leaves at the rust skeleton of some ancient gantry, it was no problem at all

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for me to dissolve away the years and imagine that I was about to step inside the elevator that would whisk me up on the first step of my voyage to the stars.

One day when I was nosing around in the ruins of what had probably been the Transit Center, I found a plastic flight card wedged down into a crack. I've still got it somewhere. I took it home, laid a piece of kitchen paper across it, and scribbled over it with a crayon. It was like conjuring up a ghost. First came a long row of numbers and letters that I supposed referred to the actual flight; then there was a date — "August 14, 2518"; and last of all a name — "Christine Mary Anderson." Beside it there was a small blank patch about the size of my thumbnail, that no doubt had once held an identity picture. I went back to the place where I'd found the card and poked about in the crack with a bit of wire, hoping I'd hook out the missing photo and know what she'd looked like. I never found it. But one hot afternoon in the middle of July, about three weeks after I'd found that flight card, I did learn what some of those letters and numbers stood for.

I was lying on my back in a nest of long grass, gazing up through the rusty lattice of the gantry at the clouds drifting slowly across the blue sky and daydreaming that I was just about to lift off and head out to Orbit Station, when I heard footsteps. I rolled over onto my stomach and peered out, but I couldn't see anyone. I couldn't hear anything, either, and, since the footsteps had stopped, I supposed that whoever it was had gone away. But just to make quite sure I began worming my way through the bushes toward the rim of the silo. My aim was to creep along beside it till I had a clear view out across the open space beyond. I pushed aside a bunch of sycamore leaves and found myself staring straight at the captain.

He was sitting on the ground, not more than a couple yards away from me, with his back resting up against the wall of the silo and his legs stretched out in front of him. He was just starting to unwrap a paper packet that he had in his lap. Shadows from the tallest of the sycamores were shifting back and forth in blotches across his peaked cap and his stained overalls. There was a line of dark blue paint like a sort of cloudy bruise all down one sleeve and across the back of his left hand.

I took all this in in the fraction of a second before I ducked down and let the branch swing back into place. At that same instant he raised his head.

I didn't think he could have seen me and yet I knew that he'd guessed I was there. I sensed it somehow. Then I heard him say: "Come on out and let me have a look at you. I don't much care for being peeked at." He didn't raise his voice or anything, just spoke as though I was right there next to him — which of course I was, only he couldn't see me.

"I wasn't peeking," I said. "I swear I wasn't. I didn't know you were there."

"So that makes two of us," he said. "I didn't know you were there, either. Come on. I'm not going to eat you."

I pushed my way out slowly through the leaves and stood there in front of him.

He nodded. "Yes, I thought it might be you. What's your name, son?"

"Kevin," I told him.

"Kevin what?"

"Kevin Morrison."

He helped himself to a sandwich out of the open packet, took a big bite of it, and then held the packet out toward me.

I shook my head.

"Go on," he said. "They're really good. I made 'em myself. Even the bread."

It seemed somehow impolite to refuse a second time, so I reached out, helped myself to one from the top of the stack, and said "thank you," even though I wasn't hungry.

I sat myself down on the grass opposite him and bit into the sandwich. I'd never tasted anything quite like it. There was cheese in it and some sort of pickle, but the bread didn't taste like ordinary bread at all — it was sort of rough on my tongue and sweetish at the same time. I didn't know whether I liked it or not.

"I'll tell you one thing for sure, Kevin," he said. "You and me are the only two people within a hundred miles of here who are tasting Martian dill at this moment."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Silverdill. It's an herb that grows on Mars."

"On Mars? Really?"

"That's right." He opened the lid of one of the sandwiches, held it up to his nose, closed his eyes, and sniffed deeply.

I watched him, then I prized open a corner of my own sandwich and did the same. Like a faint whisper from the distant darkness of outer space, a thin, wild, vaguely peppery aroma teased my senses.

"Have you got it?" he said.

I nodded, and peering into the recesses of my sandwich, tried, unsuccessfully, to identify the source of the perfume. "Which is it?" I asked.

"You won't see it," he said. "It's finer than cobweb. But up there on Mars there are places where it covers the ground like silver smoke. Mile upon mile of it. And when the long winds blow you can see it rippling like water all along the bottoms of the gullies."

I stared at him. "Have *you* seen it?"

"I'm telling you about it, aren't I?"

"But up there, I mean. On Mars. You've *been* up there?"

In the shadow of his cap peak I saw his dark eyes regarding me speculatively. "That's right," he said.

I suddenly remembered my treasured flight card. I fished it from my hip pocket and held it out to him.

He wiped his fingers on his overalls, took the rectangle of plasticard from me and examined it. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it," I said. "In the ruin over there. I've been wondering what all those numbers and letters mean."

He tilted the card so that the light fell slantwise across it and allowed him to pick out the script. "They're just passage information," he said. "The numbers are the different flights and the statics data. L2 is Lunar Two. V.O.3 means Venus Orbital Number Three."

"She went to Venus?"

"It looks like it." He handed back the card and helped himself to another sandwich.

"I wonder who she was," I said, gazing at the little blank patch where Christine Anderson's face should have been.

"What was that date again?" he said.

"August 14, 2518."

"Eighteen was just over ten years before they closed Venus off. She could have been going back home. In those days the rich settlers used to send their kids back here to get a college education."

"But how do we know she was a kid?" I said.

"Well, she was eighteen and a half years old and she weighed one twenty Earth pounds."

"How do you know that?"

"It's right there in the statics specs." He reached out, took back the card from me, and pointed with a blue-stained forefinger to the end of the row of figures. "Oh one eight point six — that's the age, eighteen years, six months; one twenty — that's the Earth weight. F/S stands for female, single. At that age she wouldn't have had the technical qualifications to be on attachment to I.P.T. or one of the other companies."

He handed the card back to me, reached down beside him, and took up a carton of beer. He tore open the corner spout and set the carton to his lips. I watched his throat move as he drank. "Were you with I.P.T.?" I asked him.

He shook his head, removed the carton from his mouth just long enough to say: "U.P.O.," then set it back and drank some more.

"Were you captain of a ship?"

His eyebrows wrinkled into a frown. He unplugged the half-empty carton and set it down on the grass beside him. "How's that?" he said.

"Were you the captain of a ship?"

"I was Postal Service. You ever hear of a captain in Postal?"

"But I thought I heard ... I mean, doesn't Mr. Polatski...?"

His brow cleared. He grinned and exposed teeth so white and even I guessed they couldn't all be real. "Capton," he chuckled. "That's my *name*, son. C-A-P-T-O-N. Capton, like yours is Morrison."

"Oh," I said, doing my best to keep the disappointment out of my voice. "I

thought perhaps you'd been the captain of a starship."

This struck him as pretty funny. He laughed out loud. "And you thought I was topping up my miserable company pension by helping out Charlie Polatski on the side? Hell, Kevin, if I'd been top brass I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now. I'd be stretched out beside my own private pool on Airey Heights or someplace, counting up my dividends."

"But you did *go* to Mars, Mr. Capton?"

Perhaps he detected the undertone of pleading in my voice, or maybe I'd stirred up memories that had lain in him undisturbed for a long, long time, because he looked at me as though really he was looking right through me to something far away in the distance, something only he could see.

"You did, didn't you, Mr. Capton ...?" I prompted.

He slowly brought his eyes back to focus on mine. "Sure I did," he said. "I spent two years there."

"Two *years!*" I echoed reverently. "What was it like?"

At that moment there was a shrill whistle from the direction of the distant sheds and I heard a voice yelling: "Capton! Hi, Capton! Phone!"

He climbed to his feet, swigged of the last of his beer, then scrunkled up the carton and the paper from his sandwiches and chucked them over the wall into the silo pit. "Glad to have met you, Kevin," he said, and set off at a loping trot across the ancient rutted concrete. The sun-warmed air had the effect of making him look as if he was running through ankle-deep puddles of silver.

I didn't see Mr. Capton again for over a week. Not to talk to, that is. But we caught sight of one another when I was downtown with my mother. He saluted me and I waved back. Mother asked me who he was, and I told her he was someone I knew from school. It seemed best not to let on where I'd met him because she was dead set against my playing around up there.

In those days Dad was still a ground field inspector on the Eastern Area of the Solar Grid. That meant he was away on circuit quite a lot of the time. When he was home at the weekends we often used to go fishing together. The day after I'd caught sight of Mr. Capton downtown, Dad took me out on the estuary, and while we were waiting for the fish to bite I asked him to tell me about the Colonies and why they'd broken away. I said I'd got a history project to do over the holidays for Mr. Benedict.

Dad always liked it when I asked his help in things to do with school, and he weighed in all about the years of atmospheric restructuring and the early pioneers and the great postwar Migrations and the Companies and the Federation — most of which I knew already. It was interesting enough in its

way, but it was still *book* history — I couldn't *feel* it like I could feel that old flight card or sniff the scent of Mr. Capton's silverdill. Finally I was moved to ask Dad if the settlers were *different* from us.

"How do you mean 'different'?" he asked.

"Well, do they think the way we do?"

"About what, Kev?"

"Well, about us. About themselves. About each other."

Dad gave me a peculiar sort of look and shook his head. "What do *you* suppose?" he said.

"I think they *are* different," I said. "I think they'd have to be."

"They're just men and women, Kev. Like us. Hey, watch out there! You've got a bite!"

And that was that.

The funny thing is, I wasn't at all sure what I'd meant myself by my question. I was just trying to put into words something that I'd felt instinctively was missing from Dad's lecture — something that would span the gulf between his "facts" and my memory of the expression on Mr. Capton's face when he'd closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of the silverdill. So I made up my mind to seek out the old man once more and question him about it.

I caught up with him two days later. First, I made sure he'd seen me hanging about in the distance; and then, when he took his lunch break, I was there by the silo waiting for him. "Hello, Mr. Capton," I said. "I was hoping I'd see you."

"Well, I'm certainly flattered to hear you say that, Kevin," he said, easing himself down in the shade of the sycamore. "And what can I do for you?"

I told him about my make-believe history project. "You're the only person I know who's really *been* there," I said. "I thought maybe you could tell me what it's *really* like."

He looked at me from out of the shadow of his peaked cap, and I suddenly noticed that his eyes were really two different colors. One was brown and the other a sort of greeny gray. I looked away quickly in case he might be offended by my staring at him.

"Don't tell me you haven't seen the Sagas, Kevin," he said. "They never seem to screen anything else these days. Red Planet Pioneers, Stardust and Sandstone—"

"Of course I have," I said. "But that's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what *are* you talking about?"

I glanced up at the rusty skeleton on the gantry. "I mean like when you said about how the silverdill looks. How it is when the long winds blow. I mean like that."

"Ah, so you remembered that, did you?" He nodded his head slowly.

I didn't say anything.

"And you want me to tell you about it?"

"Yes, please, Mr. Capton."

He helped himself to a swig from his carton of beer, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand and started in on his lunch pack. "How old are you, Kevin?"

"Thirteen."

He seemed to consider this for a moment, then he said: "I was eight years older than that when I got my first posting."

"To Mars?"

"That's right. To Mars. I'd rather have had Venus, but I knew I hadn't a hope there. Everyone wanted it. So I put down Mars as my first choice and Venus second. There were four places on the Mars draft and I got the fourth place. So it paid off.

"We were based on Lowell — all the companies had their headquarters there — and we were sent out for eight weeks at a stretch to the provincial capitals: Dyson, Hewitt, Morgenstern, and Pollard. From there we went off to some of the outlying settlements. And each step down the ladder was like taking a step farther back into history. One time, way out beyond Ambrosie, I was shown a group of ancient von Neumann machines still at work grouped round a microwave collector mining ore. It was like stepping out of a time machine and finding myself two hundred years back in the past.

"My third schedule took me to Morgenstern, and from there I went out on a tour of the provincial suboffices. I was supposed to be learning how the postal network functioned, but the truth is I could have found all that out back in Lowell. What I was *really* doing was learning the *feel* of the place — getting to know it as somewhere real, a world on which people lived all their lives and knew as home.

"One of the things I soon discovered was that we weren't terribly popular — not on account of ourselves particularly, but for what we represented. The settlers didn't see us as we were, but as they thought we would be in maybe ten or twenty years' time — off-worlder company civil servants, people who one day would be giving them orders and believing we knew what was good for them better than they knew themselves.

"I learnt that from a girl called Ingrid Dagermann out in a place called Verne. She was a fifth-generation settler and her father was the local *landaman* — what you might call a sort of cross between a tribal chief and a mayor. Councillor Dagermann owned an estate of over three thousand acres along the south shore of the Mare Novalis and had more than two hundred people on his payroll. He invited me to stay with them for a week.

"The Dagermanns lived in a great big barn of a house built out of the local sandstone on a promontory beside the Elys, one of the rivers that flowed out into the Mare. Behind it, reaching right up into the hills, was a forest of mimosa and eucalyptus that Dagermann's ancestors had planted 150 years before when the Mare was

still young. From the top of their watchtower you could see for ten miles along the coast in either direction — down to the little fishing village of Michaelis to the east and as far as the slopes of Mount Hubble to the west. The first time Ingrid showed me that view, I began to understand what she meant when she said she only had to go as far as Morgenstern to start feeling homesick.

"She took it upon herself to show me around — or maybe her father had told her to do it. She was the youngest in the family — sixteen and a few months. She had three brothers and two sisters, but her sister and two of the brothers had got themselves married and moved away, so I never got to meet them.

"Then one evening while we were sitting on at table after supper, Papa Dagermann started telling me stories about the early pioneering days, and I got to hear about the *Vindr-ghast*. At first I thought he was pulling my leg, but then I began to see that he really believed in it. He told me it was incredibly ancient — over two hundred million years, he said — and that when the original atmosphere of the planet had begun to thin out and leak away and all the land was changing into the rust red desert we used to know, the beings who inhabited it transformed themselves into spirits of the wind — what Dagermann called the *Vindr-ghast*. For millions and millions of years these wind spirits had wandered across the desolate face of the planet, mourning for their lost home, until that incredible day four centuries ago when the Federal restructuring began and the Martian sky suddenly sparkled with billions of meteorites as the ice rain of Enceladus started to fall.

"Next day, when I got Ingrid alone, I asked her if she had ever come across this *Vindr-ghast*, but she wouldn't talk about it — not to me, anyway. She said I wouldn't understand.

"In the afternoon of my last day she took me on a pony trek up into the hills behind Verne. It was right off the beaten track, and compared to the woods and fields along the coast it was really barren. The scrubland gradually gave way to tufted marram and silverdill — and then, as we climbed up higher, we came to a sort of stony plateau where there was hardly any vegetation at all, just those little fist-sized balls they call 'Wanderweed' trundling along before the breeze. The plateau must have been about a mile wide — up there distances aren't that easy to judge unless you're used to it — and plumb in the middle of it was an outcrop of dark rock — basalt, I think she said it was — standing all by itself. It didn't look like a natural formation, but it couldn't very well have been anything else, not in that place. We rode right up to the foot of it, and then she swung herself down off her pony and told me we were going to climb to the top.

"It couldn't have taken us more

than ten minutes, but when I was about halfway up something stopped me dead in my tracks. I heard voices singing. At first I thought it must be Ingrid — she was about five yards ahead of me — but then she glanced round at me over her shoulder and I saw it couldn't possibly be her. Besides, there must have been at least a dozen of them, maybe more — some high, some low — but they were all sort of blending, harmonizing with one another, like a choir in a cathedral. If Ingrid hadn't been there with me, I think I'd have been back down at the bottom inside of ten seconds — most likely with a broken neck. As it was I scrambled up till she was within an arm's length of me and asked her what it was. She told me it was the wind.

"And she was right. When I reached the top I discovered that the sound was coming from the wind blowing across a sort of honeycomb of holes in some stumps of rock that were poking up out of the top of the outcrop like a fistful of fingers. They acted like organ pipes. Some of them were open to the sky and rainwater had collected in them. The holes varied in size from a few inches to over a foot across. Some were so deep I couldn't see to the bottom of them. There must have been hundreds of them altogether. I guessed it was a sort of natural freak — volcanic probably.

"I sat down to get my breath back after the climb and rested my shoulders against one of the pillars. Even though the wind had dropped almost to nothing, I could still feel the rock vibrating. I'd got over my fright by then, and half in fun I asked Ingrid if what we'd heard was this *Vindr-ghast* which her father had talked about. 'This is a *Kirkja*,' she said. 'Father thought you might like to see it.'

" 'And what's a *Kirkja* exactly?' I asked.

" 'It's a sacred place.'

" 'Sacred?' I echoed. 'Who to?'

" 'The *Vindr-ghast*, of course.'

"I still couldn't be sure if she was being truly serious, but I thought I knew her well enough by then to be able to say: 'Do you mean to tell me you really *believe* those stories about creatures living here on Mars all those millions of years ago?'

"She just looked at me out of the corners of her blue eyes and didn't say anything.

" 'But if they did,' I said, 'there'd still be *some* traces of them left, even after all this time. Like we have fossils back on Earth. Nobody's ever found anything like that, have they?'

" 'The *Vindr-ghast* weren't like that,' she said. 'They weren't like us at all.'

" 'Then what were they like?'

"She turned her head over and gazed out across the plateau to where, away in the distance, the Mare Novalis gleamed like a sheet of silvery silk in the pale midsummer sunshine. 'They were like music,' she said softly.

" 'And what's that supposed to mean?'

" 'What is only a part of us was the whole to them,' she said. 'They had no selves like we do.'

" 'Then what did they look like?'

" 'Not like any one thing,' she said. 'Sometimes they could look like clouds drifting, or maybe the wind rippling in the silverdill. They could be eucalyptus leaves shivering, or dark waters rocking under the stars. They could look like all of those things. They could look like anything that was beautiful to look at.'

"As she said that the breeze woke up again and stirred her short fair hair about her face. All around me the rocks seemed to draw in their breath and sigh. Then they began to hum like bees in summer. I felt the skin on my arms and legs gathering itself up. I shivered.

" 'It's time we were going,' she said. 'It wouldn't do for us to outstay our welcome.'

"She took me by the hand and helped me to my feet, then led the way back down the track to where our ponies were waiting for us. And all the way down I fancied I could hear those weird wind voices crooning after me like a dirge for a lost soul.

"As we made our way home across the plateau, I glanced back over my shoulder at the dark mound of the *Kirkja,* and suddenly I found myself desperately wanting to *believe* in the *Vindr-ghast* — to somehow make it be true. I remembered how back on Earth, thousands of years ago, men and women had believed that every mountain, every wood, every lake had possessed an invisible spirit — a sort of soul of its own that had served as a kind of living link between men and the world about them. And then those old beliefs had changed and the old gods had been driven out like the *Vindr-ghast.* But on Earth it was man who had done it. Man had torn up the grasslands and turned them into lifeless deserts; man had spewed out the acid rains that had killed the forests and poisoned the living waters; man had broken faith with his own past, and by doing that had come within a breath of destroying himself along with his heritage. As I thought of all this I felt as if a great sick weight were pressing down on my heart.

"We dropped down from the edge of the plateau into the valley below. At Ingrid's suggestion, we got down from the ponies and walked beside the little stream. It was then that I tried to tell her all that was troubling me so deeply. I told her how what had happened back on Earth mustn't be allowed to happen here — how people like her father must band together and prevent it from happening. They must find some way to bring pressure to bear on the companies. They had to. I doubt if I'd ever talked about anything so passionately in all my life as I did to her then.

"She listened to me without saying anything much in return, just nodding her head from time to time. When at

last I'd run out of steam, she stooped down and broke off a silvery feather of the dill that was growing there beside the water. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'It won't happen here. I know it won't.'

" 'But you can't know,' I said. 'How can you know?'

" 'I can't tell you that,' she said. 'But it won't happen. They won't let it happen.'

" 'Who won't?'

"She just smiled that strange inward smile that she'd smiled when she was telling me how the *Vindr-ghast* had looked, and she shook her head. Then she rubbed the silverdill between her fingers and held it under my nose. 'Now you'll always remember me and the *Vindr-ghast*,' she said.

"The next day I said good-bye to the Dagermanns and to Verne and began the long trip back to Lowell. Within a week or so I was caught up in the familiar routine of the service, and Ingrid and Verne and the *Vindr-ghast* had begun to seem like something I'd dreamt of years ago and in a different world. But I never forgot. I had only to catch a whiff of that silverdill and I was back there with her again, and then it was my job and the office that seemed unreal.

"The following year, when I was back here on my first home leave, the Martian Settlers' Council declared independence. They broke with the companies and cordoned themselves off. Overnight everything changed. At first there was a lot of wild talk about mounting an expedition of repossession, but nothing ever came of it. It was never really on, anyway. Even if it might have worked, no one could have afforded it. The whole Empire business was shown up as a sham. The truth is, it had never been anything else except maybe in the very early days. But once the colonists had begun thinking of Mars and Venus as home, the writing was there on the wall. Only no one back here had bothered to read it till it was too late. The settlers had come of age. They didn't need us anymore. And I guess that's about all I can tell you, Kevin."

"Then you never saw her again?" I said.

"Ingrid?" He shook his head. "I wrote her a couple of times before I left — we'd more or less fixed that I was to stay with them again during my second tour. But there never was any second tour."

"She sounded nice," I said. "Really nice."

Mr. Capton glanced across at me out of his brown eye and his gray-green eye, but he didn't say anything.

"When she said about how it wouldn't happen — how *they* wouldn't let it happen — was she talking about the *Vindr-ghast?*"

"What do you think?" he said.

"She could have meant her father and the Council, couldn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose she could."

"I don't think so," I said. "I think she meant the *Vindr-ghast.*"

"And what makes you think that?"

"Well, because she *believed in it.* Like her father did."

"Go on."

"It sort of held them together, didn't it? Made them different from us, I mean? It was something they could share in and we couldn't, because they'd grown up believing in it and we hadn't."

"You could well be right at that," he said.

"Do *you* believe in it, Mr. Capton?"

He didn't answer straightaway, then he said: "I think I must have come pretty close to it. Up on that plateau above the Mare Novalis I almost believed in it. Maybe I still do from time to time." He raised his right hand, felt around inside his overalls, and pulled out a battered old wallet. He unfolded it and from a pocket somewhere deep inside he drew out a little plastic envelope. He laid it flat on his palm and held it out to me. "Careful now," he said. "Don't you try to open it. That one's precious."

I held the little packet up by one corner and peered into it. Inside I could just make out something that glittered smoke-faint and silvery as moonbeams on water. I stared at it for a long time, and then I handed it back to him.

He replaced it inside the wallet and put the wallet back in his pocket. Then he climbed to his feet, grinned down at me, and said: "Time I was getting back to work. Good luck with the project, Kevin."

For a moment I couldn't think what he was talking about, and then I remembered. "Thank you very much for telling me all that, Mr. Capton," I said. "I won't forget it — ever."

"It's been my pleasure," he said.

I watched him as he walked away over the sun-baked concrete toward the distant huts. He seemed to be wading through a lake of quicksilver. He didn't look back.

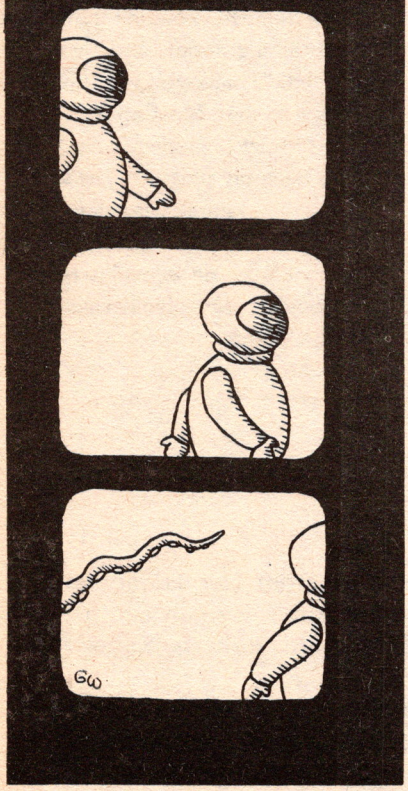
Coming soon

Next month: "With A Little Help From Her Friends" by **Michael Bishop,** a story about a remarkable woman and a reunion of the Beatles. Also, stories by **Keith Roberts, Robert F. Young** and others.

Soon: "Steam Bird" a thriller about a truly different U.S. - Soviet confrontation, by **Hilbert Schenck,** author of "Hurricane Claude."

Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

KRULLTURED PEARL

After the disappointments and disposables of this summer's batch of kiddie fodder, *Krull* might have just looked good in comparison, but I don't think that's the whole story. It's an unpretentious movie (discounting the ad campaign, of course — one *always* discounts the ad campaign; them that goes to a movie because of the ads or the pre-release publicity deserves what they usually gets) with a lot of good things going for it.

The setting is Krull, a planet with two suns (of two suns?); its culture is picturesquely medieval and one of those currently fashionable mixtures of the magical and the mechanical. It is invaded by the Beast and his followers, who arrive on the planet in a sort of a peripatetic palace, a gloomy fortress/castle with the habit of shifting to another locale at least once a day. Prince Colwyn and Princess Lyssa, heirs to two of the great kingdoms of Krull, are just in the process of being married (a love match) when the Beast and his horde bust up the ceremony, kill everyone in sight (including the two Kings), kidnap Lyssa, and decamp.

Colwyn alone survives the massacre, and guess what he sets out to do? (Don't you long for the day when a Prince in this situation decides to go somewhere and grow vegetables?) But here's the gimmick. The magic weapon is found almost immediately;

it's a glaive — which technically is a halberd, which technically is a ... oh, to hell with it. *This* glaive is a sort of many-bladed jewelled boomerang with magical properties. The real problem is to find the Black Fortress which keeps wandering around the countryside. And, as you might guess, no timetable for its arrivals and departures has been provided. So there's the quest.

Along the way, Colwyn picks up the usual wise old man, young boy, comic relief (an inept magician), cyclops, and outlaw leader with heart of gold and outlaws attached. The mixed band zigzags across the landscape in search of various beings with occult powers that might be able to provide a Black Fortress schedule, tangling with representatives of the Beast, enlisting the aid of the Emerald Seer, and braving the hideous widow of the web, an ancient crone who lives in a silken bower held by a huge spider's web. There is, of course, a huge spider to go with it.

It's not giving anything away to say that eventually Colwyn gets a flying Fortress arrival time, and there is a showdown on the premises, with a few surprises and a happy ending.

Now this scenario has some pretence to originality, but could well have ended up a messy comix-style disaster. Luckily, a little element called style was introduced; even effects that are a touch blue around the edges are forgivable if done with spirit and imagination, and if even the scenes *without* special effects have a magical quality, it's obvious there's intelligence at work.

In *Krull* there are quite a few scenes photographed in natural settings; these have been carefully and oh-so-artfully shot, and though there wasn't a special effect in sight (well, an extra sun now and then), the viewer is convinced that this is a fantasy landscape. The artificial settings, of course, are more easily given a fantastical air, which doesn't mean we all haven't seen studio-built settings with all the fantasy of beautiful downtown Paducah. Those in *Krull* have been very well designed; the marriage takes place in a classic fairy-book palace, and the Black Fortress interiors are consistently osseus in design — boney, to be vulgar about it — bringing to mind some of the famous stage settings Isamu Noguchi created for Martha Graham. The bower, web, and translucent white spider of the widow of the web are very beautiful; most of the picture is very beautiful, in fact, a neglected quality in these days when it seems to have been forgotten that film is a visual medium. (Or maybe it is that beautiful is *out*.)

The visual pleasure extends to the principal actors; Ken Marshall looks like what a handsome prince *should* look like (I smiled tolerantly at the comparisons to Errol Flynn until I saw the picture, but must concede the point — Mr. Marshall knows how to buckle a swash) and Lysette Anthony was

fire, ice, fragility, and intelligence — a true princess. Other actors are recognizable from Masterpiece Theatre productions: that grandest of old fuddy-duddies, John Welsh (Merryman in "Duchess of Duke St."), is the Emerald Seer, and the beautiful Francesca ("Lillie") Annis is the widow of the web. They also bring style and a touch of class to the production.

One special sequence must be cited. The final leg of the journey can only be accomplished by and on the far-travelling fire mares, which are luckily close at hand to be rounded up (a short rodeo sequence) and which bear a resemblance to the striking but hardly graceful steeds that pull beer wagons. But then they take off; they travel on fire (no, *they're* not on fire; it's the medium on which they travel) and it's a memorable and beautiful journey through the dusk and night. The FX freaks will complain that there are times when process shooting is too obvious; I can only reiterate that when an idea is this good, and its realization for the most part this successful, who gives a flying fire mare if some seams show? *Krull* certainly may be kiddie fodder, but compared to the rest of such we've gotten lately, it's kiddie kaviar.

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Pat Cadigan says that she doesn't run, jog, trot or anything like it. "The only way I'd run would be if something were chasing me." Her response to the current mania is the piece of mordant extrapolation you are about to read...

Another One Hits the Road

BY
PAT CADIGAN

"Lemmings would be the obvious comparison," said my father, looking down his nose at his coffee cup. "But it's not true about them drowning themselves. They don't make a suicide march to the sea. I think it's closer to medieval dancing mania."

"Bushwa," said my mother without lowering her newspaper. "And what do you know about medieval dancing mania, anyway?"

"Not much, really, except that bands of people would come dancing through villages in Europe and somehow the dancing was contagious. The villagers would join in and dance themselves to exhaustion. Sometimes even death."

Behind the newspaper, my mother sniffed. "Well, there's only one thing wrong with that theory, Zeke." Zeke was not my father's name. It was what my mother called anyone she thought was trying to swim in the shallow end. "Nobody's dying. And nobody seems to be exhausted, either. So how about that?"

My father shrugged. "A miracle."

They didn't ask me for my opinion. As a divorced woman temporarily returned to the nest, I was relegated to seen-and-not-heard status during their conversations at table. My parents had never given a fig for Dr. Spock or Montessori. I ate my waffle slowly, listening with my mind in neutral.

"Miracles don't grow on trees," said my mother. The paper rattled as she turned a page. "And only God can make a miracle."

"It's all a miracle." My father sat back and stared into space. Sunlight coming in through the window over the sink sliced across the top of his bald head, giving him a bright, slightly lopsided skullcap. "Breathing. Living.

Black holes. All creation. It's all one miracle after another. So why not this miracle, too?"

"Because all the other miracles ought to be enough for anyone."

"And it's funny that this time it's running and not dancing. I don't find that reassuring at all." He looked at me, just to show he knew I was still there. I was going to have to be out by the end of the week.

My mother deigned to lower her newspaper a few inches. "I don't think they're running to reassure you or anyone else. Damned selfish of them, carrying this fitness thing to such an extreme. You know, they're already talking shortages in the East."

"Shortages?" My father sat up, leaning his arms on the table. "What kind of shortages?"

"Food. And clothing. Especially running shoes. Electricity. And services like trash removal."

"There's an electricity shortage?" My father's voice was sour with skepticism.

"Well, power outages, blackout and brownouts in some areas."

My father frowned deeply. "This is going to get bad."

I wanted to laugh at the idea of an Adidas shortage. Instead, I dragged the last fragment of my waffle through the maple syrup, put my plate in the sink, and went out for a ride on my bike.

"They'll be here in a couple of days," my mother was saying as I was going out the back door.

* * *

I never thought of riding a bike just for the sake of exercise. I rode whenever I felt the need of motion. In the six weeks before I'd left Marv, I must have done over two hundred miles. Of course, I reasoned; I'd been traveling away from him symbolically and I'd been riding around in circles, also symbolically. I must have finally tired of living symbolically. I had certainly tired of living with Marv.

The streets of Colburn Springs were empty, as they always were on a weekday morning. Everyone was at work thirty miles down the turnpike in the same city where I'd left Marv to his fate. I'd come up the turnpike driving against the current. Like swimming upstream so as not to spawn.

The day was almost warm, almost cool, as clear and tart as natural crystal. A good day to ride a bike or run a long distance. Some amount of miles to the east, it was the same day. A classic marathon day. It was my father's opinion that they were running east to west because of a tendency to follow the sun. Considering the earth's rotation, he'd added, this would make the planet a giant treadmill, except that since the runners were not up to rotational speed, they were losing ground, even though they were clocked as going just a bit faster every day.

On television, they had shown the film of the bridge collapse in Pennsylvania, where five hundred had died. The thousands behind them had run in place at the edge of the abyss until a

few thought to lead them on a detour. The five hundred were replaced and then exceeded, stretching the mass out and out and out, until the gap between the group that had gotten across the bridge and the group left behind after the collapse had been filled.

I though about it as I rode, mostly in a westerly direction. I stopped at the city limits and was home long before lunch.

It seemed to strike only if you were on foot.

"... mayor had sharply critized the Colburn Springs Running Club," the radio said solemnly, "stating that the raising of a banner welcoming the Runners encourages and abets victims of mass hysteria in need of psychiatric help.

"In Ohio, an attempt by a family to remove their twenty-year-old son from the mass of Runners and have him deprogrammed failed when the would-be deprogrammers were apparently infected by the crowd and simply kept running."

My father shut off the radio. "Listen, Pamela," he said. I moved my legs so he could sit down on the couch with me. "I've been making a list of expressions that have to do with running."

I put down the magazine I'd been reading, since he had decided to confer the status of adulthood on me, at least for the time being.

"Letting your emotions run away with you, running out, running on empty, on the run, run-on, run down, run over, hit-and-run, runaway, run like sixty, *Rat race*." He raised his eyebrows in a significant way.

I winced inwardly. He was being a bore again, but I couldn't tell him so.

"Can you think of any others?"

"No, Dad." I went back to my magazine, but he wasn't through with me.

"How about synonyms for running?"

"I don't know. *Jogging. Trotting. Sprinting.* I don't know."

"Did you notice the way they said it on the radio just now? Runners, with a capital *R* that you can actually hear." He put the list on the coffee table and stared at it. "It's medieval dancing mania all over again. It would be better if it were dancing. You dance to music. There's nothing so bad about music. Running implies fright from — excuse me, *flight from* something." He looked about the living room. "Where's your mother?"

I couldn't resist. "I think she ran down to the store for something."

He gave me a look. "You think that's funny. Well, it's not. She could catch it and want to run with them." He slipped a ball-point pen out of his shirt pocket. "There's another. Run with the pack." He added it to the list.

"I can't picture Mother jogging. She's more the weight lifter type than she is track and field."

"This isn't jogging, it's mania." My

father plunked his chin on his folded hands.

"Maybe it isn't flight from something," I said after a bit. "Maybe they're all running *to* something and we just don't know what it is."

My father exhaled noisily. "People only run from. They walk to, but they run from. When you get to be my age, you'll realize that. Run from, walk to." He sat tensely on the edge of the sofa cushion until we heard my mother come in.

Colburn Springs had a bar for every church. Both kinds of establishments had been built to hold very small congregations. I took in an afternoon service at Edith's Tap Room. The drink of the day was The Runner — vodka and prune juice. The cocktail waitress was wearing track shoes. So was the bartender and one of the half a dozen other customers. The television over the bar was on for anyone who wanted to keep up with the soaps.

I wasn't in the habit of drinking in the afternoon, but it was something else to do besides sit around my parents' house just being divorced.

"Sure you don't want a Runner?" said the bartender when he brought me my second beer.

"If I wanted to Run, it wouldn't be to the bathroom."

"That's what they all say." He stroked his moustache absently. "One of my best jokes and it fell flat as old beer."

"Not many prune juice drinkers around."

"When they get here, are you gonna Run?" he asked me.

"Hadn't thought about it. You?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I was sorta thinking I might see how long I could go along with them. I do two miles every morning. That's my limit, two miles. Been running every day for the last year and I can't get past two miles. I just don't understand it."

The man sitting three stools away from me turned to look at the bartender in disbelief. "You kiddin'? You could get infected."

"Infected?" The bartender laughed. "What do you think they got, measles?"

"That's what they call it on the news, gettin' infected. Buncha fitness freaks in West Virginia did just what you're talkin' about doin'. Most of 'em are still goin'."

"Yeah. That must be something." The bartender stared into space and smiled. "Like some kind of afterburner kicking in. I've heard runners talk about it. How they'd be going along, fighting for every step, about to collapse, and then suddenly they get their second wind. They say it's like a power switch cuts in somewhere in their bodies and the pain disappears. They feel lighter, like there was less gravity holding them down and they were being carried along on the air. Body becomes a machine. A running machine. It could go on forever. The mind be-

comes clear, like it went up to a higher place, like being way up on top of a mountain where there's no smog or traffic or noise or anything, just pure, clean world, and you could take one more step beyond that, right into the sky itself."

The man stared at him and then finished the last third of his drink in one gulp. "Jesus. You're infected already."

The bartender shook his head. "I wish I were. But I'm not."

"You wait," said the man. "They'll come through here and take you right along with them." He held up his glass. "You wanna hit me again before you go? Like one for the road, only my one and your road."

The bartender made him another drink. On the television, the soap opera ended and was replaced by a title card, big white letters on a blue background. *Update — Day 22: The Runners.* A moment later a deep male voice intoned the same words for the benefit of the illiterate in the audience. Edith's Tap Room went quiet. The picture switched to a woman sitting behind a news desk.

"This is Glenda Blaylock with an update on the progress of the compulsive marathon that began twenty-two days ago in New England. Thus far, the Runners' circuitous route has taken them down along the Eastern seaboard, then back up—"

"Nuts," said the man who'd been talking to the bartender. "Crazy, all of them. People are like sheep. All you got to do is tell them to do something and they'll do it. Follow the leader. Nobody's got their own mind anymore. If you went on TV and said it was chic" — he pronounced it *chick* — "to jump off the top of a high building, they'd be lining up at the nearest skyscraper in two seconds."

The cocktail waitress swatted him with a Handi-Wipe as she went by carrying a tray of empty glasses. "Fasten it, Bill, I want to hear this."

He looked scornfully at her running shoes. They were bright blue and didn't go with her straight black skirt at all. "Yeah, you'll probably take off, too. Like to see you running in that skirt."

"I've got a pair of shorts in my locker just in case. Now will you button up?"

The man hunched lower over the bar, muttering something.

"—where they immobilized the city for three days just by sheer numbers. Thus far, four main groups of Runners have been distinguished, but there is no accounting as yet for various smaller groups that may be en route to join one of the larger ones."

"Efforts to stop one of the Runners and conduct an examination have met with no success, and medical authorities are still at a loss to explain the phenomena—"

"Phenomenon," said the man at the bar. "It's phenomenon, singular. One phenomenon, two phenomena."

"You're a phenomenon, Bill," the

cocktail waitress said. "You drink while they Run. I'm sending my kids to college just on what I make on you."

"Then you better hope I keep comin' here," Bill said evenly. Instead of telling him to be quiet, the bartender reached up and turned the volume control on the television.

"—interview taped with a Rhode Island woman three days ago."

The newswoman was replaced by a thirtyish woman in T-shirt and shorts, filmed from a slow-moving truck that had managed to find an uncrowded spot on a highway filled with Runners.

"How long have you been running, Jeannie?" asked an unseen interviewer.

"Almost a week," she answered, puffing only a little. Her fists moved up and down out of the picture like pistons.

"And how do you feel?"

"Great!" She flashed a smile as she brushed her frizzy blonde hair back so it wouldn't flop in her eyes.

"What happened to your shoes?"

"The laces broke so I just Ran out of them." The camera panned down her body to her bare feet and back up again.

"Doesn't it hurt to Run barefoot?"

"Uh-uh. Feels great." Another quick smile.

"Do you think it's because the skin on your soles has thickened or calloused because of all the miles you've gone?"

"I don't know, I'm not a doctor."

"Bounce, bounce," jeered Bill. "This must be the world's longest-running jiggle show. The next thing she's going to Run out of is her bra."

"And you're not tired at all?" said the interviewer. The back of his head and one hand holding a microphone appeared briefly at the bottom left of the picture.

"Nope. I feel wonderful. The more I run, the more I can run."

The truck accelerated a little too much and the woman was suddenly several feet behind. There was a glimpse of dozens of other people around her before the truck slowed down to let her catch up.

"So how long are you going to keep on Running, Jeannie?"

"I dunno."

"What about your family?"

"My husband's around here somewhere."

"Do you have any kids?"

"Yeah, two boys, seven and five. They're about five miles back, I think. Their little legs can't keep up as well."

"Aren't you worried about them?"

"Uh-uh."

"Do you have any idea where you're going?"

"Bye," she said and veered off into a thick pack of Runners. In another moment she was gone, obscured by the pack. The truck came to a stop so the camera could show us all the Runners passing by. Then it panned down the road. There were people as far as the eye could see, all bobbing up and down the way people do when they run.

"And they're coming this way," said Bill disgustedly. "Buncha friutcakes."

"Supermen," said the bartender, adding, "and superwomen," with a glance at the waitress. "They can run forever, never getting tired, never getting hurt. Did you see that woman's feet? They weren't bleeding or anything. She looked beautiful. And happy."

"—through the blockade, injuring several guardsmen." The newswoman was back on the screen. "Five guardsmen abandoned their posts and took off after the Runners, shedding their helmets and weapons. Other attempts to halt the Runners have met with similar results. One man was almost killed when he was trampled by—"

I looked away from the TV, pretending I was a camera panning the room. Two men at a dinky little table were watching the report expressionlessly, their hands feeding nuts to their mouths in a mindless, automatic way. Another man sitting by himself stirred a drink that was slightly amber, pushing the ice cubes down with a swizzle stick and watching them pop up again. The woman sitting two tables away from him looked as though she were about to pass out. Her eyelids kept fluttering closed.

"—sixteen, including ten men and six women before state police shot him. He was identified as Malcolm Corby, thirty-four, of Seattle. He had apparently traveled across the country specifically to shoot at the Runners. The sixteen dead people have not yet been reliably identified. The bodies are currently undergoing autopsy, but results so far have not been disclosed.

"Twenty-five miles south, on the same highway, the National Guard released tear gas in an unsuccessful attempt to halt the Run. Runners simply ran through the gas without stopping. Protests from various groups around the country, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Red Cross, have caused the president to issue a ban on any further action of this nature. In a statement to the press—"

I finished my beer and put the mug down on the bar with a thump. The bartender didn't look away from the television.

"They're not supermen," Bill said with acid satisfaction. "They can be killed."

"Killed but not stopped," the bartender said dreamily. "They're still Running and there are more of them than ever."

Bill snorted like a horse.

"—from Ann Arbor this morning, proclaiming themselves the Runners for Jesus. Ten miles out, most of them had already collapsed and had to be taken to hospitals. The last Runner for Jesus gave up three miles later. Elsewhere—"

"Shut it off," said Bill suddenly, with a begging note in his voice. "This is depressing. Things are bad enough without—"

"This isn't necessarily bad," said the bartender, losing only a fraction of his dreaminess. "And if you don't like it, you don't have to drink here."

"—deny rumors that a woman Runner thrust her six-month-old son into the arms of a bystander and Ran on. A spokesman for the mayor's office stated that this was, quote, indicative of the mythology already springing up around this thing, unquote.

"So far, only half a dozen towns have found it necessary to declare martial law. Police and National Guardsmen are still traveling with the Runners in makeshift escort, which authorities believe has kept the number of civil disturbances to a minimum.

"Meanwhile, mental health clinics and hospitals are reporting a large influx of people who are troubled because they do *not* have Running Fever. Here with an in-depth report on this phenomena—"

I put a ten-dollar bill on the bar and walked out. No one noticed me leave.

He flagged me down three blocks from my parents' house. Not much more than a kid, twenty-one or twenty-two, with a tape recorder swinging from one shoulder and a camera hanging off the other. One of the advance guard of reporters following the Runners. There'd be a lot more of them soon, as well as police and National Guard. I hadn't thought of that. In spite of the news reports, I'd actually just expected to see the Runners come down the highway as though they were in a normal marathon, only larger.

"Ma'am, you got a few minutes to talk?" the reporter asked as I pulled my bike over to the curb.

"You want to ask me about the Runners."

"Right. I'm doing a series of articles on the small towns along the Runners' route, and I'd like to interview you, get your reactions to what's been happening over the last three weeks."

I shrugged and pulled my bike up onto the sidewalk. "Don't know if I can really help you. I've been busy getting divorced."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your fault." I paused. "Is it?"

He laughed. "I'm Jim Andros."

"Pamela."

My leaving off a surname caught him by surprise briefly. Then he was all business and professional journalism. I wondered if the ink on his diploma was still wet. His red hair was thick, growing out from a hairstyle that had been meant for blow-drying. "Have you been following the Runners on the news?"

"I just saw a report on a TV in Edith's Tap Room, but I haven't been following them deliberately. You don't really have to. They follow you, as it were. It's all over the news."

"How do you think Colburn

Springs is taking the imminent onslaught of Runners?"

I frowned at him.

"What I mean is, have you noticed a change in the tenor of the town. As it were."

I shook my head. "I guess you're talking to the wrong person. Up until three weeks ago, I was living in the city for the last six years. I don't know anything about the tenor of Colburn Springs, as it were or as it weren't."

"Oh. Well—" he gave me a helpless grin and held up his tape recorder gamely. "What do *you* think about it, personally? About the Run."

Unconsciously, I'd begun to walk toward my parents' house. He walked with me; the bicycle ticked between us. He was almost a head shorter than I was. "It doesn't seem real yet. Just a thing on the news. 'Day 22, America on the Run.' " I shrugged again.

"Why do you think so many people are 'on the run,' as you put it?"

"Maybe they think something's chasing them. Maybe they're all going somewhere they haven't told us about yet." Really, I thought, it was amazing what you'd say to a reporter. As though he were an artificial person, a mechanism not meant to engage your feelings or judge them, or you. I smiled at the tape recorder.

"How do you think you'll feel when they finally hit Colburn Springs?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think you'll catch Running mania?"

"Me?" I hadn't considered that at all. "I can't imagine it." Then the words he had used registered on me. "You should come home with me and talk to my parents. My father calls it mania, too. He has an interesting theory you might want to hear."

Jim Andros's eyes lit up. "Do you think your parents would let me interview them?"

"They might." Or they might throw you out, I added silently, and didn't know why.

"I left my car parked back there."

"That's all right. We're only a block and a half away from my parents' house. Your car will be safe."

"Mania," my father said.

"Fitness," said my mother. "It's this fitness thing, it's gotten out of hand. Mass hysteria or hypnosis or something like that."

I almost felt guilty for the way I had arranged from them to double-team Jim Andros, ace cub reporter for a magazine he'd never named. Perhaps there wasn't one and he was just out to win the Pulitzer Prize on spec. I left them in the living room and puttered around in the kitchen, thinking I might have a snack to take the edge off my beer high. I could hear them quite clearly.

"... miracle," my father was saying. "It *is* miraculous when people can run for days without eating or sleeping or going to the bathroom."

"Bushwa. A yogi could do it, you

know, one of those men who sleep on a bed of nails and poke spikes through their cheeks. Mind over matter. It happens every day."

"But the body would eventually break down under so much punishment. Because the concentration would eventually break down, they couldn't maintain it. Stress fractures, shin splints, torn feet, sprains, muscle spasms—"

Jim Andros said nothing. He must have been very small on the couch, serving as a conduit for their argument. There was a radio on the counter, but I didn't turn it on.

I was surprised when the reporter agreed to stay for supper. The argument was still picking up momentum, but I thought he'd have run out of tape by then. Perhaps he was just recording over previous slower portions of the argument. I didn't pay much attention.

They paused to watch the evening news together, all three of them. They sat in a row on the couch. What a sight. The news said the northern group was veering south little by little, but the southern group was still hugging the Gulf of Mexico. There were the usual films, including a clip of children from about kindergarten age through early teens amid a phalanx of adults. Day care on the hoof. The oldest Runner that anyone knew of was a sixty-nine-year-old woman named Emma Kent, who had Run away from a retirement community.

My parents resumed talking to the reporter during the meager sports segment (it seemed major league baseball teams as well as fans had been depleted by the Run). I went out for another ride on my bike.

Neither the National Guard nor the police had shown up in Colburn Springs as yet, but there were plenty of cars with out-of-state license plates parked in the slanted spaces on the main drag. Not much of a main drag, bearing the gradiose name of Broadway. More reporters, I figured, finally coming in. A good majority of them had probably gone straight to the city, where the disturbances and the news to report about disturbances would be much showier. Running Mania had begotten Pulitzer Mania.

I rode in circles around Colburn Springs, making each one wider in a lopsided way. I rode faster sometimes and slow other times, but always I kept the curve of the circle going inward. I had no desire not to.

Edith's Tap Room was much too crowded for me. I could hear the voices inside from the street. It was starting to get dark, anyway, and I doubted my ability to operate a bicycle on two or three beers at night. On my way home, I saw him again in almost the same spot as before. He looked worn thin, eroded by my parents. His limpness seemed to extend to his equipment. I pulled over to the curb without waiting for him to wave at me.

"Did you get what you wanted?" I asked.

He patted the tape recorder with a tired smile. "Your parents spoke very freely and at great length. I had to record over some of the earlier stuff they said before they really got going."

"Take any notes?"

"No." The smile turned sheepish. "I'm not a reporter." He stared down at the front wheel of my bike for several seconds. "I'm just following the Runners."

I was surprised and not surprised all at once. "Is it your girlfriend or a relative? Or just a close friend?"

"What?" He squinted at me. The streetlight overhead buzzed as it went on.

"The Runner you're following. Is it your wife or—"

He shook his head. "I don't know any of the Runners. I'm following them because I'm following them. I want to."

"How long have you been at it?" I should have been a reporter, I thought sourly.

"Ten, eleven days, I guess. I want to understand about them. I want to know. But I can't Run. I've tried, I just can't. I tried to build up my endurance so I could be with them — *in* them — but I couldn't even go half a mile. None of them would Run with me, anyway. They all ignored me, like I wasn't there. So now I go where they go and talk to people. Maybe something someone says will help me understand. They're all so — they're just — they're—"

"Supermen. And women."

He nodded reluctantly. "Oh, yes. There's that. They are. I guess I'm jealous. I don't know why I can't be one of them. Why did they all get to Run and not me? Why can't I, even though I want to?" He tilted his head back and looked at me as though from a great distance. "Have you ever in your whole life been taken by something?"

"Taken?"

"Yeah. You know, taken. *Taken.* Found something and had it come to life inside you so that you were wrapped in it and wrapped around it at the same time, and there was nothing you did that was not for its sake and no place that you could go where it wasn't?" He could have been about to smile or cry, but he did neither. "I've never had that, ever. And it feels like I've never had anything." He fidgeted with the tape recorder absently. "Nothing has even consumed me. I'd like to feel like that someday. Just once. Like the Runners. I'd like to have some kind of power in me. I think that must make you — I don't know — bigger, somehow."

I came close to telling him I knew a bartender he could talk to. Anything that anyone did apparently had the potential for groupies. At last I said, "Well, at least you've got all the material for a series of articles. You could do them, anyway, even if you're not a reporter."

He frowned, vaguely annoyed.

"I'm not a Runner and I can't Run, anyway. You know, if you put your ear to the ground, you can hear them coming. If they're close enough. I've done it. Like in the movies, when you'd see an Indian listening for horses or buffalo approaching."

"Look—" But I didn't know what I wanted him to look at, and he wasn't interested; abruptly, he wandered past me, moving eastward where night and the Runners were coming on together.

I got on my bike.

Like waiting for a storm, a big one. A bad hurricane or a tornado," my father said. We were staring at the television, which was temporarily devoid of any reports on the Runners.

"Bush and wa," said my mother firmly. "If people had the good sense not to pay attention to them, not go out and watch them like a damned parade, you'd see it come to an end pretty quick. They'd all take trains and planes and buses home just as soon as they saw they wouldn't be getting any more publicity."

"What'll they do when they get to California?" my father said, giving my mother no attention. "I mean, when they get to the ocean? They won't be able to just run across *that.*"

"Good question," I said. "Of course, by then they'll be backed up to Salt Lake City."

"Maybe it will be like those ants. Soldier ants or whatever they're called, where they make living bridges of their bodies, some of them sacrificing themselves so that others can cross a water barrier. A bridge of people from California to Hawaii, from Hawaii to Asia. They could run all the way around the world like that."

"And if they do, *then* what happens?" asked my mother. "Do they just start over?"

"You *persist* in misunderstanding, don't you?" my father bellowed.

"What's there to understand?" my mother shrieked back.

"You don't *want* to understand! *Fitness* craze? *Fitness* craze, when people can run for three weeks without—"

"Craze as in crazy!"

Then they were both shouting at each other simultaneously, their words colliding and splintering unintelligibly. Underneath, the TV hummed in faulty transmission, drowning out the bubbly sitcom, adding an edge. My teeth seemed to be vibrating in my head.

The humming rose and my parents' voices rose with it. I got up from the easy chair and shut off the television. The screen went dark, but the humming remained. It was in my ears. My parents kept hollering. I put my hands over my ears, and the humming became a roar trapped in my head. The room dimmed, brown fog suddenly obscuring everything. I'd gotten up too fast.

I moved unsteadily to the glass patio door and shoved it open. The backyard was dark and unexpectedly

cool, but I couldn't feel that very well through the humming.

You know, if you put your ear to the ground, you can hear them coming. If they're close enough.

I knelt and pressed one ear, then the other, into the sparse, scrubby grass that refused to become a lawn. The humming receded, but I couldn't hear them. They weren't close enough. How close did they have to be? Jim Andros had never said.

The news had said we could expect the first Runner to arrive in Colburn Springs at about noon. That wasn't right. The first Runner went through the main drag at 10:32 A.M., Running all alone down the center of Broadway while most of Colburn Springs's population gaped behind long barricades on the sidewalks. I watched it on television. The Runner was a youngish man in unremarkable running clothes; he also wore running shoes, which was remarkable. That meant he was a fairly new Runner. There was some speculation on the part of the reporter with the live minicam team that the man was perhaps not a real Runner but an athletic attention-seeker. She was wrong. He was a Runner. Anyone could see it, the way his body moved in a long-established rhythm. I wondered how many days he'd been going. The camera zoomed in awkwardly on his face. There was no perspiration on his skin, no fatigue pulling his features down. The camera watched him go and then searched the crowd for reaction. There was little among all the faces, young, old, middle-aged, ageless. No use trying to go to work today. The Runners would still be tying up the turnpike by quitting time, thousands and thousands of bodies. I felt guilty looking at all those familiar and almost familiar faces. There was something indecent about watching something happen less than a mile away on television.

Twenty minutes later the next Runners showed up, perhaps four dozen men and women of varying ages, all more ragged than the first Runner had been. Over half of them were barefoot.

"They run out of their shoes," explained the reporter, as though no one listening had ever heard that before. "The laces break due to the constant friction. And their socks, of course, those wear out—"

I turned down the sound and watched the Runners in silence. There was a heavy man with a moustache; his stringy dark hair flapped up and down and his belly jiggled slightly. To his left was a boy of seventeen or eighteen with a winestain birthmark splayed over one cheek like the mark of a strange slap. Just behind them was a secretaryish-looking woman with smooth mahogany skin and a determined set to her mouth. She was wearing a skirt and blouse, no shoes. The blouse had pulled out of the waistband of the skirt, the underarm seams had ripped out, and most of the buttons

had come off. Her slip peeked through the open blouse. The man and woman beside her were obviously Running together, at least for the time being. They seemed to be chatting.

My mother leaned over me to turn up the sound and I jumped. I hadn't heard her come up behind me. "Bunch of fools," she said. "There's a network report on Channel 7." She tapped a spot on the screen. "There's their camera crew. They're in a better position. Looks like they've got people prepared to run alongside Runners for interviews, too."

Obediently I changed the channel and saw the Runners from the other side of the street, and closer to the corner they were coming around the road leading off the turnpike exit. Or entrance, depending on your point of view.

"They could have bypassed Colburn Springs completely," my mother said, throwing in a disapproving *tch*. "They could have stayed on the turnpike and gone straight to the city. But no, they have to come through here and make spectacles of themselves. Showing off."

"Picking up more Runners."

My mother and I turned to look at my father standing in the doorway. "Spreading the mania."

"—wondering who in this small, quiet town will be the first to break from the crowd of spectators and join the Runners, if indeed anyone does. Statistically, it seems to be a sure bet that one out of every forty to forty-five residents will catch 'Running Fever,' as many doctors are calling it." The voice belonged to a rather well-known lady journalist whose autobiography was crawling up the best-seller list. I was surprised the network had her tracking the Runners. And then again, perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Perhaps she had demanded it. I wondered if the doctors she'd mentioned had issued a report on Running Fever Fever yet.

"It is estimated that it may take close to three days for all of the Runners to pass through Colburn Springs, assuming that the vast majority of them don't stick to the highway. In spite of authorities' pleas for people to stay away from areas where the Runners are passing through, it seems everyone in this small Midwestern town has turned out to watch this strange migration. We now seem to be at a break in this group of Runners; only a very few are on the street right now, though observers on the interstate have told us it is clogged and positively impassable to vehicles. State police—"

I wandered away from the television. Bicycle? Somehow, it was out of the question. My parents left the TV on all day, watching it in spurts. When I came back to it later in the afternoon, the camera was inching over the crowd. I saw Jim Andros, his fresh face a study in awe and frustration. He made me think about all the people

whose friends and relatives had joined the Run and left them behind. But I doubted that any of them were pacing the Runners. Or not many, anyway. Some might have, for a while, and then given up. The news had run a few interviews with relatives left behind, mostly wives and husbands. All of them had been at home.

Who will be the first Colburn Springs Runner? was the catchphrase of the day. The lady journalist's voice lost its contralto polish and turned positively salacious each time she said it. You could tell she was disappointed that it was taking so long. No one had tried to fake it, either; no one had burst onto the street in running clothes, pretending to be seized with Running Fever. If the bartender from Ed[illegible]'s Tap Room was trying to see how far he could run with them, he was doing it somewhere else.

The Runners hit in earnest just after noon. A helicopter hovering over the town recorded their entrance from the air. A river of Runners, live confetti from that height, pouring in from the highway. Broadway was too narrow to accommodate all of them; they spilled onto other streets, across lawns and backyards, swirling around houses and eddying around lightpoles and mailboxes.

"Flood," my father said. Something I'd learned in biology passed through my mind vaguely. What percentage of the human body was made up of water — 87 percent? 90 percent? Or was it as much as 95 percent? I couldn't remember.

The people next door left sometime in the middle of the afternoon. My mother was torn between wanting to see the Runners in person and watching them on television with all the explanations and commentary. She didn't say as much, but I could tell. She and my father circled each other skittishly all day, trying to keep the length of a room between them.

I didn't see the first Colburn Springs Runner break out when it actually happened, but the network made use of instant replay several times, at regular and slow motion. A thirty-year-old bank teller named Evie Koster. She was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and running shoes, as though she'd come unsure whether she would end up Running or not. but wanting to be ready just in case. *Go, Evie, go!* some women were yelling in the background. Probably people she worked with. A man carrying a concealed handgun was arrested by two men in plainclothes who had the FBI look about them. As the plainclothesmen were leading him away, the man told the journalists that he had planned to use the gun on himself if he'd gotten Running Fever.

"Drastic cure," my father said.

"Might as well," said my mother from the other room. She made a supper that none of us ate. By dark, five more people from Colburn Springs had Run away. No one knew how that

stacked up statistically.

My father was asleep sitting up on the couch at 3 A.M. when I got up to ride my bike to Broadway.

The Runners had saturated Colburn Springs. There was almost no street where they weren't. I had to ride carefully. They would suddenly appear out of the darkness in twos and threes, looking mildly surprised that they would meet anything going in the opposite direction. There was no audience on the side streets, at least not at that hour of the morning, though I did see a few police cars with officers dozing in them parked at the curbs. There was no sign of the National Guard, except for one Runner in fatigues. They were probably all in the city, I realized, getting ready for riots.

There were a surprising number of people still out on the sidewalks. I walked my bike along the street on the other side of the barricades, waiting for someone to stop me and tell me to get behind them. No one did. I stopped to buy a cup of coffee from a lunch wagon parked across a driveway.

"Hello?"

Somehow I'd thought I'd find Jim Andros still out. I turned around and nodded at him. He looked like someone trying to fight off imminent nervous collapse. Lack of sleep and Running Fever Fever made his face too pale, his eyes too bright.

"I had to record over the conversations I had with your parents. Everyone wanted to talk to me about the Runners. I still can't get close to them." From several streets over came the sound of a big dog barking excitedly. Someone had Run through his backyard and awakened him.

"You should get some sleep." I gave Jim Andros a sip of my coffee.

"After they've gone. They're already getting into the city. I heard the reports on a radio. Someone tried to kill one of them already. Not all of them are coming through Colburn Springs. They fanned out, some of them are Running through some town north of the turnpike."

"Price's Bend," I said.

"What?"

"That's the name of the town north of the turnpike. Price's Bend."

He smiled helplessly and put a hand on my shoulder to hold himself up. "I'd have thought they'd want to stay together. But who knows, maybe as long as they're Running, they *are* together."

I leaned my bike against the front of the lunch wagon and put an arm around him. He wasn't heavy at all. "It's not like I want to stop them or hurt them. I don't. I want to Run *with* them and I can't get in." He pointed at one of the barricades with the coffee cup, as if he were toasting it. "There's a thing like that between me and Running. Can't find my way around it. I can't. I never will. Never will."

I let him finish the cup. A dozen Runners passed close enough to stir our clothes with their wind. One of them was wearing perfume, a heavy

spicy scent I recognized as Jungle Gardenia. Someone turned on a transistor radio.

"—units are removing the protestors who are lying in the middle of Route 85, chanting, 'Stay here, stay here.' It seems to be an organized protest, but authorities have yet to identify a leader or leaders."

Well, that would be next, I thought. Anti-Runners. The Stayers to balance the Goers or something like that. Jim Andros was babbling. I made him sit down on the curb. A man from the first-aid station put a blanket around his shoulders and tried to make him take a pill.

"We've had a number of cases of hysteria," the man told me while Andros kept twisting his head away from me. "Maybe you should take your friend home."

"He's not from around here," I said, "and he's not my friend. Just let him alone. He'll be all right. He's been following the Runners. He's got Running Fever Fever."

The man frowned at me and then managed to get the pill between Andros's lips. He spat it out with such force it hit a passing Runner on the thigh.

The eastern sky had just begun to lighten when a new flood of Runners arrived. This time I heard them, the pat-pat-pat of thousands of sneakers and bare feet on asphalt. Film crews that had been dormant came to life, and floodlights went on all over the place. This group was so numerous and dense I couldn't even see across the street. It was a blanket of people, bobbing and billowing unevenly, their breathing a strange-sounding wind. The sun rose and there was no letup. They came in the thin sunlight and kept coming as though they meant to cover every inch of ground with themselves. Few of them bothered to look around. It was impossible to distinguish them one from another anymore. I thought I could feel the pavement vibrate under my sneakers.

Someone touched my shoulder. Jim Andros was standing beside me, his head wagging back and forth as though he were watching a fast rally at a tennis tournament. I think I knew what he was going to do a second before he did, but I was too sluggish, moved too late. By the time I had brought my arm up, he had darted out into the midst of them.

They buffeted him back and forth as they Ran past, ignoring his outstretched arms. I couldn't hear what he was shouting to them. Perhaps he wasn't shouting at all, only opening and closing his mouth impotently. His clutching hands slipped off a large man; there was the sound of cloth tearing. Andros staggered backward into the path of three teenage girls. Two of them went around him; the center girl gave him a shove, just a little one, and he went down.

I caught sight of him briefly among the flashing legs, trying to get up again

before the Runners became too thick and he disappeared altogether. Several people pushed past me from behind and fought their way into the current of Runners, forcing a clear spot with their bodies. Several more followed. Someone grabbed my hand and I was in the middle of a human chain stretching into the road. The Runners were forced around us, up onto the sidewalk, knocking over the barricades. My bicycle tipped over with a clatter. Someone fell over it, recovered, and Ran on.

The man who'd been trying to feed Andros a pill earlier now waded out of the road with Andros in his arms. The rest of us retreated to the sidewalk as the Runners rushed to fill in the space we'd left. The man gave me a dirty look. Andros's nose and mouth were oozing blood. I heard someone say the man was a nurse from the county hospital. He carried Andros around the side of the lunch wagon.

Andros's camera and tape recorder were lying on the sidewalk where he'd left them. There was film in the camera; seventeen frames of a roll of thirty-six pictures had been exposed. I opened the back of the camera and exposed the rest of it before I put it down on the sidewalk again. I had to hold the tape recorder to my ear to hear it. He hadn't been very careful about recording his ersatz interviews. There were bits and pieces of different people expounding on the Runners, one recorded on top of another.

"... escaping their responsibilities," said a woman authoritatively. "I'd like to just take off, too, but I got kids to look after, a home to keep up — and buster, if you don't think that's a job..." Her voice faded out and came back again. A man in pajamas jogged past me, brushing my arm. "—plete freedom of movement, but you're going to see terrible things happening in the next few days. Shortages, the TV said, and I don't know what-all. If a foreign power like the Russians wanted to attack us, now would be the time to do it with all these nuts Running like rabbits. That about sums it all up, you know, maybe you don't remember—" There was a click and then another woman was talking.

"—somewhere but *I* don't know where. Be interesting to watch them from a plane, see where they go. I don't know why they don't just grab one of them—"

"They've tried," said Jim Andros's voice neutrally. "Other Runners converge on them and knock them down."

"But surely children, if they tried grabbing a kid—"

Click. Now a young male voice.

"—get away, just get away, you know?"

Click. Another woman. "—the end. These are the Last Times we're living in, in case you didn't know that, and it's probably a signal that the Rapture's about to happen. We cannot understand how God works or why He works the way He does, but this is all

part of His plan. I don't know if He will touch me and tell me to Run, but I will do His will, as we all shall. But you know, you can Run but you can't hide, not from Him. Perhaps when they reach to Pacific Ocean they'll all vanish or they'll run into the sea and drown themselves like the Gadarene swine, I *think* it was the Gadarene swine—"

Click. The voice was an old lady. "Get that thing out of my face, you little punk, I'll—"

Click, click. "Lemmings," said a man. "The rat race. How is this so different from the way we've been living, go, go, go, rush, rush, rush, going nowhere and making damn good time, like the old joke says—"

A woman jounced by, and as she did, the gold necklace she was wearing dropped off onto the street. She never broke stride. I picked it up. It was a chain with a gold heart on it. The heart was inscribed *Maria.*

"—surprise me anymore," said another man's voice. "Our priorities are wrong, all wrong, and if I thought I could keep up that pace, boy, you better believe I would."

"Why?" asked Jim Andros.

"Why? Why the hell not? Sick of everything, goddamn IRS, goddamn job, goddamn inflation, goddamn welfare cheaters, goddamn—"

Click, click, rumble, click. Then Jim Andros's voice, all alone. "—body really knows, nobody and nobody knows what will happen, and *I* don't know. I'm waiting and waiting for it to come over me and then I'll know. At last, I'll *know,* just what this one thing of all the things there are to know that I'll never know, but *this* thing, *this* thing, I don't want to be left behind, God, please don't leave me behind, I don't want to be—"

The click cut into his sob. I dropped the tape recorder on the sidewalk and it shattered.

"Miss—"

It was the man, the nurse. He was still angry with me for not saving Jim Andros. As though I'd have been able to. A lot of people had gathered behind the barricades while I'd been listening to the tape recorder. They watched as the man reached for me.

I pushed aside his arm and Ran.

That was all there was to it, except for the faint ringing in my ears. I moved easily into the center of the flow, falling into Running stride as though I'd been doing it all my life. I could feel the hot sun on my back, the air parting around my face. Somewhere behind me, the lady journalist would tell a coast-to-coast audience that another Colburn Springs resident had hit the road, if she'd even noticed. A frizzy-haired man pounded along beside me, keeping his eyes straight ahead. We passed through an intersection where the light was flashing yellow. I thought I saw the bartender from Edith's Tap Room watching with envy and awe from the corner. Beside him a woman — the waitress? Yes, it

was — waved and stepped into the road just as I went by. She caught up with me in the middle of the next block.

"Celia," she said.

"Pamela." And just for the hell of it, we shook hands.

"Nothing to it," she said, her voice thudding a little. "I thought it would be like a revelation, a thunderbolt in the head. But it's nothing."

"Nothing at all," I said.

"Bill's up ahead. The grouch who thought they were all nuts."

"I remember. From yesterday."

Through a gap in the Runners, I saw my parents walking along the sidewalk, close to the barricades. Not many people were lining the sidewalks here. My mother's eyes caught mine; I saw her move away from my father.

"Listen," I said to the waitress over the ringing in my ears.

"What?"

"What do you hear?"

"The sound of the Running."

"Nothing else?"

"What else is there?" Her oversized shirt fluttered and jounced with her breasts. "Do you think we'll get there soon? Wherever it is?"

"Soon enough," I said. "As long as we keep Running."

We went along without speaking for another block. My body was going just fine. Things inside me were changing, slowly and subtly. The waitress and I looked at each other. She could feel it, too.

I glanced over my shoulder. The Runners filled the world behind us, so that there was nothing else. My mother's face appeared briefly.

"Do you think it's gaining on us?" I asked Celia. She looked back.

"I don't know," she said. "But as long as we keep Running—"

She moved a little ahead. I matched her pace, drew even with her. Pound, pound, pound. To Run was a thankless job, but someone had to do it. Town gave way to neighborhoods; we left those behind, too. The access road down to the next entrance to the turnpike was narrow. We stumbled through the grass, through a ditch, jumped a guardrail and met those who stayed on the highway. Ahead was the city. A car was broken down or abandoned on the shoulder. Someone ran up onto the hood, the roof, the trunk, and jumped off. Others followed. The sound of metal buckling and glass breaking carried up to me. I kept going. And going. And going.

Mary Pangborn writes: "My brother Edgar was the writer of the family. For me, during a lifetime as a supposedly hard-headed biochemist, writing remained a secret vice. Now, being safely retired and well into second childhood, I have finally dragged the typewriter out of the closet. Stories previously published in NEW DIMENSIONS and UNIVERSE."

My Name Is Samantha

BY
MARY C. PANGBORN

DEAR EDITOR, Sir or Madam: I don't know if this is the proper way to write to you, but I hope you'll read it anyway. Because if you can't help me, I don't know who can. All I want is to put an advertisement in your magazine, but I have to tell you about it so you will see it's an emergency.

I guess I'm supposed to say who I am. My name is Samantha Allenby. I don't know where Mama got "Samantha" unless she somehow knew it was a right name for a witch. Funnily enough, the kids at school don't laugh at it, they think it's groovy. Little do they know.

Mama began when I was quite small telling me about the witch things, how you're born that way, like it or not. You can choose whether to use the Power, she said, but you can't choose not to have it. I said it wasn't fair, what if I don't want to be a witch? And she got awfully mad, spitting and sputtering about people being too lazy or cowardly to use their gifts. Can I help it if I'd rather be a regular person and have fun?

O.K., I know that's silly, you don't have to tell me.

Usually there's only one in a family, she said, and it's mostly the girls that get it, because of the chromosomes. We haven't had that in school yet, I tried looking it up in the books but it was sort of hard going. In the old days, when they didn't know about chromosomes, they said witches got their power from the devil, or some such bullshit, so they burned them. It was pretty scary, the way Mama told it, so I asked her — I had to — "They don't do that now?" She said, "No," and then twisted her mouth sideways and said, "Not exactly. But there has

never been a human society where it was safe to be different. Never was, never will be! And you'd better not forget it."

When she gets angry-fierce like that, hating the whole world, you don't know how much to believe. And if you try asking questions, you only get more of the same. So I can't be sure I'm not doing something wrong, or even dangerous, writing to you about this. I can't help it, if that's the way it is, I've got to do it anyway.

Mama says she knew I was the one as soon as I was born, but when I tried to find out how she could tell, she threw up her hands and said, "You just *know*." But you have to be grown up before you really have the Power; you have to be fourteen at least, she said, and I can't wait that long. I've got to have help *now*.

I can do a few things already. There was one awful time, when I got mad at my kid sister Lollie. She's O.K., though if you want my opinion she's a bit babyish for an eight-year-old. Still, I ought not to have told her I was going to turn her into a frog. She didn't change, of course, but she thought she had; she sat scrunched up with her eyes popping and couldn't talk, horrible, and I couldn't get her to come back. Mama fixed her, and then gave me the most ghastly spanking I ever had, all the time telling me about the worse things she could be doing to me, and she said: "Never, never, never use a spell you cannot undo!"

She said that.

Later, when she'd cooled off some, I asked her why we learn the black-magic spells if they must never be used, and she said it was like a doctor studying diseases. To unmake the evil if you had to. That makes sense, I guess. But I can't see how it's any excuse for what she did.

I'm doing this wrong, trying to say everything at once. I only got a C in English, Miss Stimson said I didn't organize my material well enough. *Organize:* that's a very big word in school, like *adjust* and *cooperate* — I don't do so well at those, either. But I've got to stick to the point now. I have to tell you about Daddy and the path.

I'm the only one who dares go on the path in the woods now. Lollie whimpers and won't even turn her head to look at the trees when we have supper on the lawn. I don't know whether she knows what happened and is pretending not to; I can't always tell, with Lollie. She cries a lot since they took Mama away, and I guess I can't blame her for that.

As for Aunt Grace, she says it's too prickly and dark in there, she doesn't want to spoil her nylons. She can't admit there's anything to be scared about, because she doesn't believe Mama is a witch. She's always known it, of course, her own sister, but at the same time she *doesn't* know. If you can picture how *that* works. She says we've got to be Sensible and Realize

what Really happened. That Daddy ran away with Ellen Wilson. I ask you! That's what she calls a "sensible explanation"? So you can see it's no use asking for help from *her*.

Well, you need to know about the woods. It's only a little patch of trees in the place where the road bends between our house and the next. It seems like forest when you step into it because it's thick and dark the way old pine trees get, spiky dead branches at the bottom that scratch at you, but lovely if you can slip between them, the sweet smell and the quiet, and the cushiony feel of pine needles under your feet. Daddy said it wasn't old forest, merely a field that had been let grow up to pine, sometime back when the people around here were farmers, because it was too rough and stony to be worth plowing. He always wanted to get in there and cut out the dead branches to make a place to walk, but it wasn't our land.

Then the Wilsons bought the next house beyond the trees, a dreamy old place that had been empty for a while, so the pine woods belonged to them.

They were old people — I mean really old, with white hair — Mr. Wilson was retired, he'd been a professor of history. Mrs. Wilson was a sweet granny-type old lady, nice quiet voice, none of that yaketa-yaketa that makes your ears feel like they want to fold shut. We did a lot of neighborly visiting, Mama and Mrs. Wilson swapping recipes, and I'm telling you Mrs. Wilson's cookies were out of this world. Every other Sunday we'd go up to their house and sit around drinking *tea*, I'm not kidding. It sounds boring, but it wasn't, because Mr. Wilson talked the way his house looked, so full of books you'd wonder how they had room for the furniture. Then, after we'd finished the tea, Mr. Wilson would get out the brandy bottle and he and Daddy would have their drinks. Mrs. Wilson would say, "Well, just a tiny snort," making it sound like a big deal, and he'd give her about two swallows in a doll-sized glass. Mama of course couldn't touch liquor, and after the first time Mr. Wilson remembered not to ask her.

And we talked about making a path through the woods before Ellen ever came, so that shows you she had nothing to do with it. Nothing ever, except Mama thinking what she did.

It was Daddy who thought of the path, sitting forward with his hands on his knees, the way he does, most chairs not being quite big enough for him — square and sunburned and all happied-up at the idea of an outdoor job. No one would think to look at Daddy that he works in an accountant's office. Forestry, you'd say, or maybe a sea captain. He said, "That could be a lovely piece of woods, Mr. Wilson, if we'd just clear some of the deadwood out so you could walk under the trees."

Mr. Wilson said, "What fun! A path to my good neighbor's house." Kind of twinkling over it, slow and brooding, warming up. "What could be better?"

Even Mama thought it was a good idea, that first day. So tiny she always looked beside Daddy, tiny and sharp-edged, her hair as black as the darkness under the pine trees; she had a shiny look to her when she was happy, though I don't suppose anyone ever called her pretty. The air sort of twanged all around her. Sometimes she could be a lot of fun. Some people think I look like her. I don't know about that, seems to me I mostly look like myself.

Anyway, it turned into a real Project for the summer, Daddy doing most of the work of course, swinging the ax and singing, but Mr. Wilson came and helped, calling himself old and feeble but acting pretty spry. There was a lot of scrabbly work to do, hauling the brush away to make neat piles. Lollie honestly worked hard dragging off branches — we kept at it even when it got hot and scratchy — and pretty soon Daddy began letting me use the hatchet, after he'd watched to make sure I could be trusted with it. That made me feel good.

Mrs. Wilson would bring down a big jug of lemonade for us, and we'd sit on the pine needles and drink it and admire our work. Actually, it took only a few days to make a good path so you could walk from one house to the other without ever going out on the road. We put bends in it, even where we didn't have to, so you couldn't stand at one end and look all the way to the other; that way it was dark and mysterious, like real deep forest. Lovely. Maybe we shouldn't have done that. But I don't suppose it made any difference.

It was Daddy's clever planning that set the line of the path far enough in so there were thick trees hiding it from the road. You could hear cars go past, but you could scarcely see them. Lollie loved that. "It's our secret!" she said, and Daddy laughed his big laugh and rumpled her hair as if she'd been a boy (she didn't like that, though). "We haven't any dark secrets," Daddy said, and Mr. Wilson came right back at him: "Speak for yourself, young fellow!" We all thought that was just too hilarious. You couldn't imagine anyone more innocent than Mr. Wilson.

We were still happy then.

But even before Ellen came, Mama had started to take against the path. A Project like that isn't ever finished, that's the best part of it, you can always find something more to do. After we had the path fixed, there was a lot of clearing needed so you could go in among the trees. It seemed Mama didn't mind having Lollie and me out there during the day, so long as we'd finish whatever jobs she'd given us first. But then when Daddy got home, he'd be working with us, and again after supper until it got too dark. And

any weekend when the weather was good. No reason Mama couldn't have been out there with us, sharing the fun, but no. She's stand at the end of the path where it came out on our lawn and holler for Daddy to come and help her with something in the house, carrying laundry baskets or fixing a drippy faucet or bringing in fireplace wood, something, anything, and usually he'd shrug and go do what she wanted, but sometimes he wouldn't. One evening we heard their voices going on and on after we'd gone up to bed; Mama said — I heard it clear as clear — "If you like your woods so much better than the house, why don't you stay there?" And Daddy laughed and said, "Swell idea! Come on, honeycomb, let's have us a night out—" and he started pulling the blankets off the bed. She wouldn't, she got madder than ever and made him put the blankets all back. But the next day everything seemed to be all right, all as usual.

Then Ellen Wilson came to visit her parents, and they invited us all to meet her.

It was a regular picnic: they had one of those tables with benches, but you could sit on the grass if you'd rather, and Ellen came over and sat with Lollie and me, easy as pie, smiling hello. We liked her right away. Lollie says she's pretty; I don't know, I didn't have to think whether she was or not, only that I liked looking at her. Not silly-pretty like those shiny magazine ads that *teeth* at you, no, she had a real *face*.

They set up the picnic table right at the entrance to the path, at their end, so every time we'd eat there it was a celebration of the path. Mr. Wilson had one of those charcoal grills, you had to wait for your hamburgers while the charcoal got ready, but they tasted all the better when you got them. Mrs. Wilson would sit back and twinkle, sort of laughing at Mr. Wilson playing with his toy. They were like that, it was one of the good things about being with them, the way they could keep poking fun at each other without sticking any pins in, both getting a kick out of it. They used to make me feel that maybe growing up and even getting old wouldn't necessarily be all bad. Anyway, you have plenty of other time to live through before you get like that, don't you?

Well, I started to tell you about Ellen.

She had only a two-week vacation. She was studying at one of the big universities, archaeology, all about Indians; she got real excited and sparkled-up talking about it, when she saw we honestly wanted to listen. The way she told it, the Indians go way back beyond history, and you can find out things about that old time by digging up the places where they used to live, to see what's left. That's what she was going to be doing the rest of the summer, going on a "dig," she called it, out West somewhere, and it was extra-special for her because the man she's going to marry was going, too. (I put

that in to help show you how wrong Mama was about Ellen.)

I thought maybe I could do some digging like that; it sounded pretty interesting, like being in a detective story and a hiking trip and a science lab all at once. She didn't laugh or tease or say how much I'd have to study in books first (I knew *that* much!) — she just looked thoughtful and said, "Sure, why not?"

So we liked her a lot, and Daddy did, too, why wouldn't he? And we were all having fun those two weeks, mostly just hanging around and talking and poking in the woods, at first we didn't notice that Mama wasn't joining it. She was terribly polite to Ellen, and maybe that ought to 've warned us, because there's a kind of politeness that's worse than yelling. I guess we were so used to Mama being sometimes peculiar, we hadn't ever thought she could be peculiar like *that*.

Ellen loved the path, loved it the right way, not oo-ah-ing or yattering how-lovely and so on, no, she walked slow, looking and smelling, breathing it in, without splattering a lot of words. Daddy was with us, and he said, "This is only part of it, come see where we cleared the rest of the woods," and they went off the path. And that was absolutely the only time they ever went off together, I know this, and there was nothing secret about it, they weren't even out of sight, merely poking about under the trees a little way off. For maybe as much as ten minutes. But Mama saw them.

She was standing halfway down the path, watching them, when Lollie and I went down toward the house, and her face had that stony-set look it sometimes gets, there's nothing you can do then except try to keep out of her way. But she smoothed it off so quick when she saw us, we thought we might have been mistaken.

There were two more good days, when nothing happened.

The afternoon of the day before Ellen was to leave, the Wilsons had a sort of good-bye party at the picnic table. Not a regular party, more of a sit-around; you don't really celebrate people's going away, even when you know they are going to something they are happy about. Cookies and lemonade, it was hot enough so the cold lemonade tasted wonderful, and everything would have been fine except that Mama wouldn't come. She told me to tell Mrs. Wilson she had a headache. I did, and Mrs. Wilson gave me a sort of funny look. I got the point: a headache is a sort of code between ladies, meaning I-don't-want-to-come-and-I-won't. Makes me wonder what you could say if you really did have a headache.

We'd finished the lemonade by the time Daddy got home. We heard him come up the path, whistling *Londonderry Air* — whenever he felt good he'd whistle some extra-sad tune like that. He stood around for a while, joshing Ellen about being in such a hurry to

meet her boyfriend on that trip to their dig, and then he said, "Better not be late for supper," and started back. We were all pretending we weren't saying good-bye, we'd see Ellen again in the morning, though we knew she was leaving early. Some kinds of pretending are a big help, so long as everybody joins in. But Lollie wouldn't pretend; she'd worked up a real pash on Ellen, and all at once she went charging up to her and kissed her, and then went running off down the path, kind of hiccuping — ran right past Daddy and on home. I said the only thing I could think of, "Guess you'll have to come see us again, Ellen," and she said, "You better believe it." Then I went, too. I was walking a few steps behind Daddy when he came to the place you can't see around, and he went around the bend.

I went on, and saw Mama standing at the entrance to the path, paying no attention to Lollie grabbing at her. For maybe two seconds there was a sort of fire-haze in the air in front of her; she was moving her hands and twisting her face, her mouth working, but no words you could hear. Then she put up both hands flat, like pushing at something, and went away into the house.

Lollie and I said together: "Where's Daddy?"

I said, "He went around the bend just ahead of me," and Lollie said, "He never came." We looked at each other, and then we looked off different ways. Went on into the house, not wanting to, not daring to do anything else. Mama was setting three places for supper.

I was trying to tell myself it was a joke, he was hiding to tease us, and I sneaked out after supper and ran up the path hollering for him to come out. Nothing. Then I tried to go off the path under the trees, and I couldn't.

I guess I knew then, but I tried not to. Next morning all the way downstairs I told myself, "He'll be there eating breakfast, like always." He wasn't. So I nipped out and went up the path again. Mama never said anything, didn't try to stop me.

I told myself it was only that I'd been scared last night, of course I could go off the path into the trees. But no. It wasn't like a wall in the way, or anything pushing at me, only my feet kept going up and down without moving anywhere, stuck in the same place. And nothing to see except it was maybe darker than usual under the trees, and no bird noises. Nothing. I did call once, I said, "Daddy, it's Samantha, come back!" but my voice sounded so awful, making a noise all by itself in that empty place, I couldn't do it again.

It was late that afternoon when Lollie finally asked: "When is Daddy coming back?" Mama was rolling out piecrust. She sort of tossed her head and tightened her mouth and said, "When I get good and ready to let him," and snapped her mouth shut on it. Then she said, "Sometimes you

have to give them a right sharp lesson."

I wanted to say, "It isn't any *them*, it's Daddy, and anyway what did he do wrong?" Didn't have the nerve. Didn't say anything. We didn't have much appetite for that pie, but the funny thing is, the pie was all right. I don't know what that proves, maybe that things don't fit together the way you might expect.

Next day was the worst, because that was when I heard him.

I thought maybe the magic would wear off by itself, would last only just so long, so I made another try at getting off the path. Same as before — I couldn't. Then there was a crashing of branches, breaking and ripping noises, though I couldn't see a whiff of motion anywhere. And I heard his voice, just once, but clear as anything: *"For God's sake, let me out!"*

I yelled back, I don't know what I said, and tried once more to push in, couldn't do it. I knew he didn't hear me. And then everything was quiet again, but the quiet was ten times worse now, because I *knew*.

I go up the path every day now, but I've never heard him again.

I went back down to the house and said, "Mama, *please*—?"

She looked at me as though she wondered how I came to be there, finally got me in focus. She said, "Well, we'll see." And that night I told Lollie, halfway believing it, "He'll be back tomorrow."

So the next morning I went up the path and just sat, waiting. And was still there when Lollie came running after me, too scared to cry and not making any sense; she kept saying "Mama—" and pulling at me to come.

Mama was sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, a big fire roaring — in July! She had pushed the furniture out of the way so she could spread a mess of things on the floor. Things I'd never seen before, shells and stones and bits of wood with carving on, and a couple of old beat-up books — witch-things, or had been, but they were all dead. I could tell. She was weaving her hands over them, muttering and chanting, now and then she'd throw something into the fire and stop to push her hands through her hair. Her face was wild, twisted out of shape, *old* — hair all straggled and lank, falling into her eyes; she looked — oh, I shouldn't say it, but it's what other people mean when they say "looks like a witch."

And of course I knew what was wrong. She had been trying to unmake the black spell that held Daddy in the woods, and she couldn't do it.

I don't know how to explain this: if the Power is in a place, you can feel it, I mean I *can*. It was there, at first, a feeble sort of glow, but as we came into the room it sputtered and went out. And Mama didn't seem to know; she kept on trying, a minute or so longer. Then she made a dead sort of noise and started pushing all her bits and pieces

from the floor into the fire. Sat there, not even crying, head down on her knees, rocking back and forth, rocking, rocking.

I said, "Mama, it's Samantha, I'm here," but she didn't hear me.

I told Lollie to run up to the Wilsons' for help, tell them Mama was sick. And then I just stood there. I guess I figured if she started setting things on fire, I could anyway put it out. She didn't, she only sat there, rocking. And then I knew she really had loved Daddy in her way, whatever her way was, even if she didn't know any better than to be jealous. And now she knew she had spoiled everything and couldn't unspoil it. I don't know what could be worse than that.

There isn't much to tell about the bad days that came next. The Wilsons sending for Aunt Grace. People coming to take Mama away to the crazy hospital. —Oh, I know you aren't supposed to call them crazies, and of course it *does* matter what words you use, nobody has to tell *me* that. Words are magic.

Anyway, there she is.

Aunt Grace is O.K., I guess, but I can't talk to her, she's too sensible. We should be grateful to her, it can't be any fun for her to come here and look after us. I could have done all the housekeeping and cooking, of course, but it wouldn't have been any use to say so, and I suppose you do have to have grown-ups around for driving the car and getting money out of the bank and stuff like that. And telling the neighbors where to get off, when they come nosying around trying to figure out what happened. Aunt Grace is good at that, she can use so many words to tell people nothing at all, it's almost fun to listen.

But meanwhile nothing is getting better. Daddy is still in the woods. And Mama in that hospital.

Aunt Grace went there to see her once, and came back saying it was no use. She won't let us go. Says: "If she knew, she wouldn't want you to see her like that. Not talking, not recognizing anyone, just sitting there. My own sister!" She thinks Mama won't ever get better. But that's because she doesn't understand about magic.

I can't explain how I know, but I *do* know that if we could get the black spell off and set Daddy free, Mama would come back, too. Maybe not the way she was, but back with us. —No, please don't think I'm silly enough to expect things to go back the way they were, before, when we were happy. They never do, do they? How do I know what will happen? I only know I can't leave it the way it is.

So now I'm asking you to put an ad in your magazine for a witch. She must be at least a third-degree witch — fourth would be better — anyway, strong enough to take off a black spell. Maybe you even know someone like that, right off, without advertising — I mean, I know most of the things you print are made-up stories, but still,

you might. Anyway, tell her I haven't any money to pay her, but I'll work it off, I'll be her apprentice, as long as she likes, even after I get old enough to have the Power. She can tell, if you let her read all this, that I could do it, anything she wants. Anything.

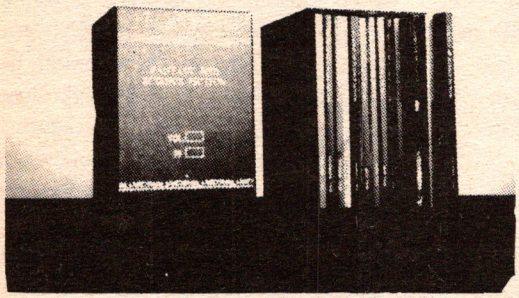
And if she happens to be young and nice-looking, tell her she'll have to disguise herself when she goes to the hospital to see Mama. She'll understand about that.

But it must be soon, because the Wilsons are selling their house and moving away. Poor Mr. Wilson had a stroke or something, they have to go where he can be taken care of more easily. So someone else will own the woods. And I heard Aunt Grace talking to Mrs. Hall down the road, she says the people who want to buy the land are going to tear out the woods and build new houses, a development. And you see, if Daddy hasn't gotten out before that — well, it's not like being merely lost in the woods, the magic has put him *into* the trees, somehow, so if they start setting their machines at the trees, I just don't know *what* would happen to him.

Maybe you think they couldn't touch those trees? Just because a person can't walk in there?

You can't really suppose black magic would keep off bulldozers.

So I can't wait. Won't somebody please help me?



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This evocative story about three men in the snow-filled Sierras is from the author of "Black Air" (March 1983) and "To Leave A Mark" (November 1982). The latter story has been expanded into a novel, ICEHENGE, to be published by Ace.

Ridge Running

BY

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

Three men sit on a rock. The rock is wet granite, a bouldertop surrounded by snow that has melted just enough to reveal it. Snow extends away from the rock in every direction. To the east it drops to treeline, to the west it rises to a rock wall that points up and ends at sky. The boulder the three men are on is the only break in the snow from treeline to rock wall. Snowshoe tracks lead to the rock, coming from the north on a traverse across the slope. The men sit sunning like marmots.

One man chews snow. He is short and broad-chested, with thick arms and legs. He adjusts blue nylon gaiters that cover his boots and lower legs. His thighs are bare, he wears gray gym shorts. He leans over to strap a boot into an orange plastic snowshoe.

The man sitting beside him says, "Brian, I thought we were going to eat lunch." This second man is big, and he wears sunglasses that clip onto prescription wire-rims.

"Pe-ter," Brian drawls. "We can't eat here comfortably, there's barely room to sit. As soon as we get around that shoulder" — he points south — "the traverse will be done and we'll be at the pass."

Peter takes in a deep breath, lets it out. "I need to rest."

"O.K.," Brian says, "do it. I'm just going to go around to the pass, I'm tired of sitting." He picks up the other orange snowshoe, sticks his boot in the binding.

The third man, who is medium height and very thin, has been staring at the snow granules on his boot. Now he picks up a yellow snowshoe and kicks into it. Peter sees him do it, sighs, bends over to yank his aluminum-and-cord snowshoes out of the snow they are stuck in.

"Look at that hummingbird," the third man says with pleasure and points.

He is pointing at blank snow. His two companions look where he is pointing, then glance at each other uncomfortably. Peter shakes his head, looks at his boots.

"I didn't know there were hummingbirds in the Sierras," the third man says. "What a beauty!" He looks at Brian uncertainly. "*Are* there hummingbirds in the Sierras?"

"Well," Brian says, "actually, I think there are. But..."

"But not this time, Joe," Peter finishes.

"Ah," Joe says, and stares at the spot in the snow. "I could have sworn ..." Peter looks at Brian, his face squinched up in distress. "Maybe the light breaking on that clump of snow," Joe says, mystified. "Oh, well."

Brian stands and hoists a compact blue pack onto his shoulders, and steps off the boulder onto the snow. He leans over to adjust a binding. "Let's get going, Joe," he says. "Don't worry about it." And to Peter: "This spring snow is great."

"If you're a goddamn polar bear," Pete says.

Brian shakes his head, and his silvered sunglasses flash reflections of snow and Peter. "This is the best time to be up here. If you would ever come with us in January or February you'd know that."

"Summer!" Peter says as he picks up his long frame pack. "Summer's what I like — catch the rays, see the flowers, walk around without these damn flippers on —" He swings his pack onto his back, steps back quickly (clatter of aluminum on granite) to keep his balance. He buckles his waistbelt awkwardly, looks at the sun. It is near midday. He wipes his forehead.

"You don't even come up with us in the summer anymore," Brian points out. "What has it been, four years?"

"Time," Peter says. "I don't have any time, and that's a fact."

"Just all your life," Brian scoffs. Peter shakes off the remark with an irritated scowl, and steps onto the snow.

They turn to look at Joe, who is still inspecting the snow with a fierce squint.

"Hey, Joe!" Brian says.

Joe starts and looks up.

"Time to hike, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, just a second." Joe readies himself.

Three men snowshoeing.

Brian leads. He sinks about a foot into the snow with every step. Joe follows, placing his yellow snowshoes carefully in the prints of Brian's, so that he sinks hardly at all. Peter pays no attention to prints, and his snowshoes crash into and across the holes. His snowshoes slide left, downhill, and he slips frequently.

The slope steepens. The three men sweat. Brian slips left one time too

often and stops to remove his snowshoes. They can no longer see the rock wall above them, the slope is so steep. Brian ties his snowshoes to his pack, puts the pack back on. He puts a glove on his right hand and walks canted over so he can punch into the slope with his fist.

Joe and Peter stop where Brian stops, to make the same changes. Joe points ahead to Brian, who is now crossing a section of slope steeper than forty-five degrees.

"Strange three-legged hill animal," says Joe, and laughs. "Snoweater."

Peter looks in his pack for his glove. "Why don't we go down into the trees and avoid this damn traverse?"

"The view isn't as good."

Peter sighs. Joe waits, scuffs snow, looks at Peter curiously. Pete has put suntan oil on his face, and the sweat has poured from his forehead, so that his stubbled cheeks shine with reflected light.

He says, "Am I imagining this, or are we working really hard?"

"We're working very hard," Joe says. "Traverses are difficult."

They watch Brian, who is near the middle of the steepest section. "You guys do this snow stuff for *fun*?" Peter says.

After a moment Joe starts. "I'm sorry," he says. "What were we talking about?"

Peter shrugs, examines Joe closely. "You O.K.?" he asks, putting his gloved hand to Joe's arm.

"Yeah, yeah. I just ... *forgot*. Again!"

"Everyone forgets sometimes."

"I know, I know." With a discouraged sigh Joe steps off into Brian's prints. Peter follows.

From above they appear little dots, the only moving objects in a sea of white and black. Snow blazes white and prisms flash from sunglasses. They wipe their foreheads, stop now and then to catch their breath. Brian pulls ahead, Pete falls behind. Joe steps out the traverse with care, talking to himself in undertones. Their gloves get wet, there are ice bracelets around their wrists. Below them solitary trees at treeline wave in a breeze, but on the slope it is windless and hot.

The slope lessens, and they are past the shoulder. Brian pulls off his pack and gets out his groundpad, sits on it. He roots in the pack. After a while Joe joins him. "Whew!" Joe says. "That was a hard traverse."

"Not really hard," Brian replies. "Just boring." He eats some M-and-M's, waves a handful up at the ridge above. "I'm tired of traversing, though, that's for sure. I'm going up to the ridge so I can walk down it to the pass."

Joe looks at the wall of snow leading up to the ridge. "Yeah, well, I think Pete and I will continue around the corner here and go past Lake Doris to the pass. It's almost level from here on."

"True. I'm going to go up there anyway."

"All right. We'll see you in the pass in a while."

Brian looks at Joe. "You'll be all right?"

"Sure."

Brian gets his pack on, turns and begins walking up the slope, bending forward to take big slow strides. Watching him, Joe says to himself, "Humped splayfoot pack beast, yes. House-backed creature. Giant snow snail. Yo ho for the mountains. Rum de dum. Rum de dum de dum."

Peter appears around the shoulder, walking slowly and carelessly. He spreads his groundpad, sits beside Joe. After a time his breathing slows. "Where's Brian?"

"He went up there."

"Is that where we're going?"

"I thought we might go around to the pass the way the trail goes."

"Thank God."

"We'll get to go by Lake Doris."

"The renowned Lake Doris," Peter scoffs.

Joe waves a finger to scold. "It is nice, you know."

Joe and Peter walk. Soon their breathing hits a regular rhythm. They cross a meadow tucked into the side of the range like a terrace. It is covered with suncones, small melt depressions in the snow, and the walking is uneven.

"My feet are freezing," Pete says from several yards behind Joe.

Joe looks back to reply. "It's a cooling system. Most of my blood is hot — so hot I can hold snow in my hand and my hand won't get cold. But my feet are chilled. It cools the blood. I figure there's a spot around my knees that's perfect. My knees feel great. I live there and everything's comfortable."

"My knees hurt."

"Hmm," Joe says. "Now that is a problem."

After a silence filled by the squeak of snow and the crick of boot against snowshoe, Pete says, "I don't understand why I'm getting so tired. I've been playing full-court basketball all winter."

"Mountains aren't as flat as basketball courts."

Joe's pace is a bit faster than Pete's, and slowly he pulls ahead. He looks left, to the tree-filled valley, but slips a few times and turns his gaze back to the snow in front of him. His breaths rasp in his throat. He wipes sweat from an eyebrow. He hums unmusically, then starts a breath-chant, muttering a word for each step: *animal, animal, animal, animal, animal.* He watches his snowshoes crush patterns onto the points and ridges of the pocked, glaring snow. White light blasts around the sides of his sunglasses. He stops to tighten a binding, looks up when he is done. There is a tree a few score yards ahead — he adjusts his course for it, and walks again.

* * *

After a while he reaches the tree. He looks at it; a gnarled old Sierra juniper, thick and not very tall. Around it hundreds of black pine needles are scattered, each sunk in its own tiny pocket in the snow. Joe opens his mouth several times, says "Lug-wump?"He shakes his head, walks up to the tree, puts a hand on it. "I don't know who you are?" He leans in, his nose is inches from bark. The bark peels away from the tree like papery sheets of filo dough. He puts his arms out, hugs the trunk. "Tr-eeeee," he says. "Tr-eeeeeeee."

He is still saying it when Peter, puffing hard, joins him. Joe steps around the tree, gestures at a drop beyond the tree, a small bowl notched high in the side of the range.

"That's Lake Doris," he says, and laughs.

Blankly Peter looks at the small circle of flat snow in the center of the bowl. "Mostly a summer phenomenon," Joe says. Peter purses his lips and nods. "But not the pass," Joe adds, and points west.

West of the lake bowl the range — a row of black peaks emerging from the snow — drops a bit, in a deep, symmetrical U, an almost perfect semicircle, a glacier road filled with blue sky. Joe smiles. "That's Rockbound Pass. There's no way you could forget a sight like that. I think I see Brian up there. I'm going to go up and join him."

He takes off west, walking around the side of the lake until he can go straight up the slope rising from the lake to the pass. The snow thins on the slope, and his plastic snowshoes grate on stretches of exposed granite. He moves quickly, takes big steps and deep breaths. The slope levels and he can see the spine of the pass. Wind blows in his face, growing stronger with every stride. When he reaches the flat of the saddle in mid-pass it is a full gale. His shirt is blown cold against him, his eyes water. He can feel sweat drying on his face. Brian is higher in the pass, descending the north spine. His high shouts are blown past Joe. Joe takes off his pack and swings his arms around, stretches them out to the west. He is in the pass.

Below him to the west is the curving bowl of a cirque, one dug by the glacier that carved the pass. The cirque's walls are nearly free of snow, and great tiers of granite gleam in the sun. A string of lakes — flat white spots — mark the valley that extends westward out of the cirque. Lower ranges lie in rows out to the haze-fuzzed horizon.

Behind him Lake Doris's bowl blocks the view of the deep valley they have left behind. Joe looks back to the west; wind slams his face again. Brian hops down the saddle to him, and Joe whoops. "It's windy again," he calls.

"It's always windy in this pass," Brian says. He strips off his pack, whoops himself. He approaches Joe,

looks around. "Man, for a while there about a year ago I thought we'd never be here again." He claps Joe on the back. "I'm sure glad you're here," he says, voice full.

Joe nods. "Me, too. Me, too."

Peter joins them. "Look at this," calls Brian, waving west. "Isn't this amazing?" Peter looks at the cirque for a moment and nods. He takes off his pack and sits behind a rock, out of the wind.

"It's cold," he says. His hands quiver as he opens his pack.

"Put on a sweatshirt," Brian says sharply. "Eat some food."

Joe removes his snowshoes, wanders around the pass away from Brian and Peter. The exposed rock is shattered tan granite, covered with splotches of lichen, red and black and green. Joe squats to inspect a crack, picks up a triangular plate of rock. He tosses it west. It falls in a long arc.

Brian and Peter eat lunch, leaning against a boulder that protects them from the wind. Where they are sitting it is fairly warm. Brian eats slices of cheese cut from a big block of it. Peter puts a tortilla in his lap, squeezes peanut butter out of a plastic tube onto it. He picks up a bottle of liquid butter and squirts a stream of it over the peanut butter.

Brian looks at the concoction and squints. "That looks like shit."

"Hey," Peter says. "Food is food. I thought you were the big pragmatist."

"Yeah, but..."

Peter wolfs down the tortilla. Brian works on the block of cheese.

"So how did you like the morning's hike?" Brian asks.

Pete says, "I read that snowshoes were invented by Plains Indians, for level places. In the mountains, those traverses" — he takes a bite — "those traverses were terrible."

"You used to love it up here."

"That was in the summers."

"It's better now, there's no one else up here. And you can go anywhere you want over snow."

"I've noticed you think so. But I don't like the snow. Too much work."

"Work," Brian scoffs. "The old law office is warping your conception of work, Peter."

Peter chomps irritably, looking offended. They continue to eat. One of Joe's nonsense songs floats by.

"Speaking of warped brains," Peter says.

"Yeah. You keeping an eye on him?"

"I guess so. I don't know what to do when he loses it, though."

Brian arches back and turns to look over the boulder. "Hey, Joe!" he shouts. "Come eat some lunch!" They both watch Joe jerk at the sound of Brian's voice. But after a moment's glance around, Joe returns to playing with the rocks.

"He's out again," says Brian.

"That," Peter says, "is one sick boy. Those doctors really did it to him."

"That *crash* did it to him. The doctors saved his life. You didn't see him at the hospital like I did. Man, ten or twenty years ago an injury like that would have left him a vegetable for sure. When I saw him I thought he was a goner."

"Yeah, I know, I know. The man who flew through his windshield."

"But you don't know what they *did* to him."

"So what did they do to him?"

"Well, they stimulated what they call axonal sprouting in the areas where neuronal connections were busted up — which means, basically, that they grew his brain back!"

"*Grew* it?"

"Yeah! Well some parts of it — the broken connections, you know. Like the arm of a starfish. You know?"

"No. But I'll take your word for it." Peter looks over the boulder at Joe. "I hope they grew back everything, yuk yuk. He might have one of his forgetting spells and walk over the edge there."

"Nah. He just forgets how to talk, as far as I can tell. Part of the reorganization, I think. It doesn't matter much up here." Brian arches up. "Hey, JOE! FOOD!"

"It does too matter," Peter says. "Say he forgets the word *cliff*. He forgets the concept, he says to himself I'm just going to step down to that lake there, and whoops, over the edge he goes."

"Nah," Brian says. "It doesn't work that way. Concepts don't need language."

"What?" Peter cries. "Concepts don't need language? Are you kidding? Man I thought Joe was the crazy one around here."

"No seriously," Brian says, shifting rapidly from his usual reserve to interested animation. "Sensory input is already a thought, and the way we field it is conceptual. Enough to keep you from walking off cliffs anyway." Despite this assertion he looks over his shoulder again. There stands Joe nodding as if in agreement with him.

"Yes, language is a contact lens," Joe says.

Peter and Brian look at each other.

"A contact lens at the back of the eyeball. Color filters into this lens, which is made of nameglass, and it's reflected to the correct corner of the brain, tree corner or rock corner."

Peter and Brian chew that one over.

"So you lose your contact lenses?" Brian ventures.

"Yeah!" Joe looks at him with an appreciative glance. "Sort of."

"So what's in your mind then?"

Joe shrugs. "I wish I knew." After a while, struggling for expression: "I feel things. I feel that something's not right. Maybe I have another language for them, but I'm not sure. Nothing looks right, it's all just ... color. The names are gone. You know?"

Brian shakes his head, involuntarily grinning.

"Hmm," Peter says. "It sounds like you might have some trouble getting your driver's license renewed." All three of them laugh.

Brian stands, stuffs plastic bags into his pack. "Ready for some ridge running?" he says to the other two.

"Wait a second," Peter says, "we just got here. Why don't you kick back for a while? This pass is supposed to be the high point of the trip, and we've only been here half an hour."

"Longer than that," says Brian.

"Not long enough. I'm tired!"

"We've only hiked about four miles today," Brian replies impatiently. "All of us worked equally hard. Now we can walk down a ridge all afternoon, it'll be great!"

Peter sucks air between his teeth, holds it in, decides not to speak. He begins jamming bags into his pack.

They stand ready to leave the pass, packs and snowshoes on their backs. Brian makes a final adjustment to hipbelt — Pete looks up the spine they are about to ascend — Joe stares down at the huge bowl of rock and snow to the west. Afternoon sun glares. The shadow of a cloud hurries across the cirque toward them, jumps up the west side of the pass and they are in it, for a moment.

"Look!" Joe cries. He points at the south wall of the pass. Brian and Pete look —

A flash of brown. A pair of horns, blur of legs, the distant *clacks* of rock falling.

"Mountain goat!" says Brian. "Wow!" He hurries across the saddle of the pass to the south spine, looking up frequently. "There it is again! Come on!"

Joe and Pete hurry after him. "You guys will never catch that thing," says Pete.

The south wall is faulted and boulderish, and they zig and zag from one small shelf of snow to the next. They grab outcroppings and stick fists in cracks, and strain to push themselves up steps that are waist-high. The wind peels across the spine of the wall and keeps them cool. They breathe in gasps, stop frequently. Brian pulls ahead, Pete falls behind. Brian and Joe call to each other about the goat.

Brian and Joe top the spine, scramble up the decreasing slope. The ridge edge — a hump of shattered rock twenty or twenty-five feet wide, like a high road — is nearly level, but still rises enough to block their view south. They hurry up to the point where the ridge levels, and suddenly they can see south for miles.

They stop to look. The range rises and falls in even swoops to a tall peak. Beyond the peak it drops abruptly and rises again, up and down and up, culminating in a huge knot of black peaks. To the east the steep snowy

slope drops to the valley paralleling the range. To the west a series of spurs and cirques alternate, making a broken desert of rock and snow. The range cuts down the middle of it all, high above everything else that can be seen. Joe taps his boot on solid rock. "Fossil backbone, primeval earth being," he says.

"I think I still see that goat," says Brian, pointing. "Where's Peter?"

Peter appears, face haggard. He stumbles on a rock, steps quickly to keep his balance. When he reaches Brian and Joe he lets his pack thump to the ground.

"This is ridiculous," he says. "I have to rest."

"We can't exactly camp here," Brian says sarcastically, and gestures at the jumble of rock they are sitting on.

"I don't care," Peter says, and sits down.

"We've only been hiking an hour since lunch," Brian objects, "and we're trying to close in on that goat!"

"Tired," Peter says. "I have to rest."

"You get tired pretty fast these days!"

An angry silence.

Joe says in a mild voice, "You guys sure are bitching at each other a lot."

A long silence. Brian and Peter look in different directions.

Joe points down at the first dip in the ridge, where there is a small flat of granite slabs and corners filled with sand. "Why don't we camp there? Brian and I can drop our packs and go on up the ridge for a walk. Pete can rest and maybe start a fire later. If you can find wood."

Brian and Pete both agree to the plan, and they descend to the saddle campsite.

Two men ridge running. They make swift progress up the smooth rise, along the jumbled road at the top of the range. The bare rock they cross is smashed into fragments, splintered by ice and lightning. Breaking out of the blackish granite are knobs of tan rock, crushed into concentric rings of shards. They marvel at boulders which look like they have sat on the range since it began to rise. They jump from rock to rock, flexing freed shoulders. Brian points ahead and calls out when he sees the goat. "Do you see it?"

"Sure do," Joe says, but without looking up. Brian notices this and snorts disgustedly.

Shadows of the range darken the valley to the east. Joe hops from foothold to foothold, babbling at Brian all the while from several yards behind him. "Name it, name it. You name it. Naammme. What an idea. I've got three blisters on my feet. I named the one on the left heel Amos." Pause to climb a shoulder-high slab of granite. "I named the one on the right heel Crouch. Then I've got one on the front of my right ankle, and I named that one Achilles. That way when I feel it it's not like pain, it's like a little joke.

Twinges in my heel" — panting so he can talk — "are little hellos, hellos with every step. Amos here, hi, Joe; Crouch here, hi, Joe. It's amazing. The way I feel I probably don't need boots at all. I should take them off!"

"You'd probably better keep them on," Brian says seriously.

Joe grins.

The incline becomes steeper and the edge of the ridge narrows. They slow down, step more carefully. The shattered rock gives way to great faulted blocks of solid mountain. They find themselves straddling the ridge on all fours, left feet on the east slope and right feet on the west. Both sides drop sharply away, especially the west. Sun gilds this steeper slope. Joe runs his hand down the edge of the range.

The ridge widens out, and they can walk again. The rock is shattered, all brittle plated angular splinters, covered with lichen. "Great granite," Joe says.

"This is actually diorite," Brian says. "Diorite or gabbro. Made of feldspar and darker stuff."

"Oh, don't give me that," Joe says. "I'm doing well just to remember granite. Besides, this stuff has been granite for a lot longer than geologists have been naming things. They can't go messing with a name like that." Still, he looks more closely at the rock. "Gabbro, gabbro ... sounds like one of my words."

They wind between boulders, spring up escarpments. They come upon a knob of quartz that rises out of the black granite. The knob is infinitely cracked, as if struck on top by a giant sledgehammer. "Rose quartz," says Brian, and moves on. Joe stares at the knob, mouth open. He kneels to pick up chunks of the quartz, peers at them. He sees that Brian is moving on. Rising, he says to himself, "I wish I knew everything."

Suddenly they are at the top. Everything is below them. Beside Brian, Joe stops short. They stand silently, inches apart. Wind whips around them. To the south the range drops and rises yet again, to the giant knob of peaks they saw when they first topped the ridge. At every point of the compass mountains drop away, white folds crumpling to every horizon. Nothing moves but the wind. Brian says, "I wonder where that goat went to."

Two men sitting on a mountaintop. Brian digs into a pile of rocks, pulls out a rusty tin box. "Aha," he says. "The goat left us a clue." He takes a piece of paper from the box. "Here's its name — Diane Hunter."

"Oh, bullshit!" cries Joe. "Thats no name. Let me see that." He grabs the box out of Brian's hand and the top falls off. A shower of paper, ten or twenty pieces of it, pops out of the box and floats down to the east, spun by the wind. Joe pulls out a piece still wedged in the box. He reads, "Robert

Spencer, July 20th, 2014. It's a name box. It's for people who want to leave a record of their climb."

Brian laughs. "How could anyone get into something like that? Especially on a peak you can just walk right up to." He laughs again.

"I suppose I should try to recover as many as I can," Joe says dubiously, looking down the steep side of the peak.

"What for? It's not going to erase their experience."

"You never know," says Joe, laughing to himself. "It very well might. Just think, all over the United States the memory of this peak has popped right out of twenty people's heads." He waves to the east. "Bye-bye. . ."

They sit in silence. Wind blows. Clouds pass by. The sun closes on the horizon. Joe talks in short bursts, waves his arms. Brian listens, watches the clouds. At one point he says, "You're a new being, Joseph." Joe cocks his head at this.

Then they just sit and watch. It gets cold.

"Hawk," says Brian in a quiet voice. They watch the black dot soar on the updraft of the range.

"It's the goat," says Joe. "It's a shapechanger."

"Nah. Doesn't even move the same."

"I say it is."

The dot turns in the wind and rises, circling higher and higher above the world, coasting along the updraft with minute wing adjustments, until it hovers over the giant, angular knot-peak. Suddenly it plummets toward the peaks, swooping faster than objects fall. It disappears behind the jagged black teeth. "Hawk," Joe breathes. "Hawuck divvve."

They look at each other.

Brian says, "That's where we'll go tomorrow."

Glissading down the snow expanse, skidding five or ten feet with each stiff-legged step, the two of them make rapid progress back to camp. The walking is dreamlike as they pump left ... right ... left ... down the slope.

"So what about that goat?" says Joe. "I never did see any prints."

"Maybe we shared a hallucination," says Brian. "What do they call that?"

"A folie á deux."

"I don't like the sound of that." A pause while they skid down a steep bank of snow, straight-legged as if they are skiing. "I hope Pete got a fire going. Damn cold up here."

"A feature of the psychic landscape," Joe says, talking to himself again. "Sure, why not? It looks about like what I'd expect, I'll tell you that. No wonder I'm getting things confused. What you saw was probably a fugitive thought of mine, escaping off across the waste. Bighorn sheep, sure."

After a while they can see the saddle where they left Pete, far below them in the rocky expanse. There is a

spark of yellow. They howl and shout. "Fire! FIRE!"

In the sandy camp, situated in a dip between slabs of granite, they greet Pete and root through their packs with the speed of hungry men. Joe takes his pot, jams it with snow, puts in on the fire. He sits down beside Pete.

"You guys were gone a long time," Pete says. "Did you find that goat?"

Joe shakes his head. "It turned into a hawk." He moves his pot to a bigger flame. "Sure am glad you got this fire going," he says. "It must have been a bitch to start in this wind." He starts to pull off his boots.

"There wasn't much wood, either," Pete says. "But I found a dead tree down there a ways."

Joe prods a burning branch, frowns. "Juniper," he says with satisfaction. "Good wood."

Brian appears, dressed in down jacket, down pants, and down booties. Pete falls silent. Glancing at Pete, Joe notices this, and frowns again. He gets up stiffly to go to his pack and get his own down booties. He returns to the fire, finishes taking off his boots. His feet are white and wrinkled, with red blisters.

"Those look sore," says Pete.

"Nah." Joe gulps down the melted snow in his pot, starts melting more. He puts his booties on.

They watch the fire in silence.

Joe says, "Remember that time you guys wrestled in the living room of our apartment?"

"Yeah, we got all those carpet burns."

"And broke the lamp that never worked anyway—"

"And then you went berserk!" Brian laughs. "You went berserk and tried to bite my ear off!" They all laugh, and Pete nods, grinning with embarrassed pride.

"Pete won that one," Joe says.

"That's right," says Brian. "Put my shoulders to the mat, or to the carpet in that case. A victory for maniacs everywhere."

Ponderously Peter nods, imitating official approval. "But I couldn't beat you tonight," he admits. "I'm exhausted. I guess I'm not up to this snow camping."

"You were strong in those days," Brian tells him. "But you hiked a radical trail with us today, I'll tell you. I don't know too many people who would have come with us, actually."

"What about Joe here? He was on his back most of last year."

"Yeah, but he's crazy now."

"I was crazy before!" Joe protests, and they laugh.

Brian pours macaroni into his pot, shifts to a rock seat beside Peter so he can tend the pot better. They begin to talk about the days when they all lived together as students. Joe grins to hear them. He nearly overturns his pot, and they call out at him. Pete says, "The black thing is the pot, Joseph, the yellow stuff is fire — try to remember

that." Joe grins. Steam rises from the pots and is whipped east by the evening breeze.

Three men sitting round a fire. Joe gets up, very slowly, and steps carefully to his pack. He unrolls his groundcloth, pulls out his sleeping bag. He straightens up. The evening star hangs in the west. It's getting darker. Behind him his old friends laugh at something Pete has said.

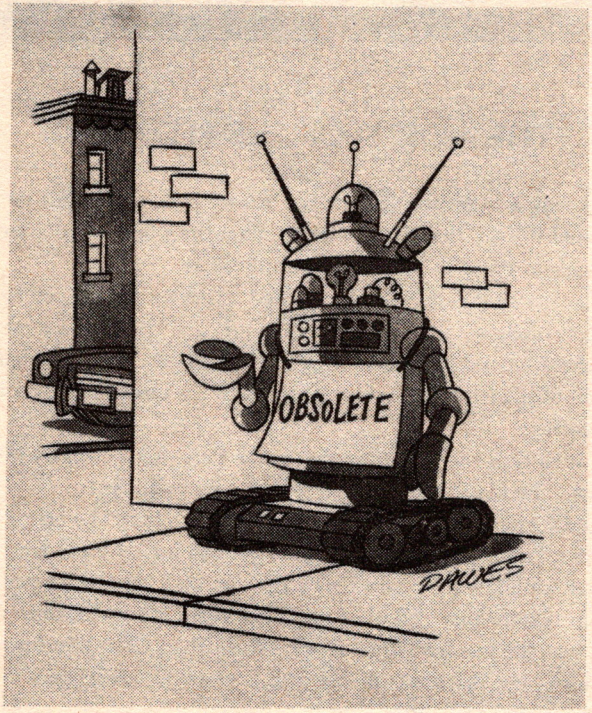
In the east there are stars. Part of the sky is still a light velvet blue. The wind whistles softly. Joe picks up a rock, looks at it closely. "Rock," he says. He clenches the rock in his fist, shakes it at the evening star, lofts it skyward. "Rock!" A tear gleams in his eye. He looks down the range: *black dragon back breaking out of blue-white,* like consciousness from chaos, an unbroken range of peaks—

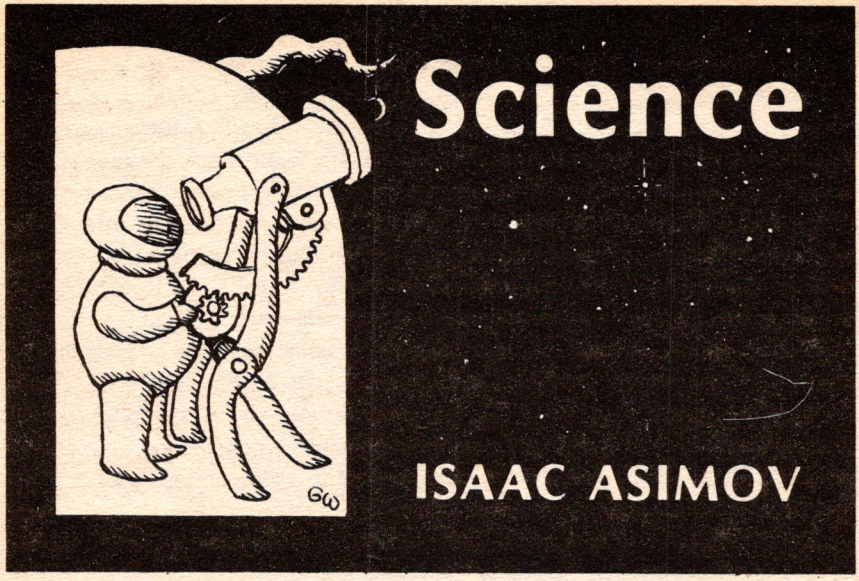
"Hey, Joseph! You lame-brain!"

"Space case!"

"—come take care of your pot before it puts the fire out."

Joe walks to the woodpile grinning, puts more wood on the fire, until it blazes up yellow in the dusk.





Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE WORLD OF THE RED SUN

When I was a little younger than I am now, and was in junior high school, I used to read the science fiction magazines that were to be found on the magazine stand in my father's candy store.

Those stories that particularly appealed to me I would re-tell to an absorbed group of classmates during lunch hour, and the most successful example of these second-hand narrations was that of a story I loved called "The World of the Red Sun," that appeared in the December 1931 issue of *Wonder Stories*.

I took no note of the author's name at the time, for he was by no means well known. The story was, in fact, the first he published.

It was only many years afterward, during which time I had come to be a correspondent and good friend of the famous s.f. writer, Clifford D. Simak, that, obtaining Donald Day's invaluable index of science fiction stories from 1926 to 1950, I looked up "The World of the Red Sun" and discovered it was the maiden effort of none other than Cliff. (And now, over half a century later, he is still active, still turning out crackerjack material, and has been voted a Grand Master by Science Fiction Writers of America.)

It has always been a source of infinite satisfaction to me that, when a mere pre-teen child, I recognized greatness in an author's first story.

You can imagine, then, the pleasure with which I came to realize, as I planned this essay, that the most logical title for it would be the one Cliff gave his first story. I am using that title, therefore, as my homage to an old friend.

Cliff's story was a tale of time travel, and the Red Sun he spoke of was our own Sun in the far future. My Red Sun, however, is the star I dealt with in considerable detail in last month's essay — Betelgeuse, the red giant.

The question is this: If we consider Betelgeuse as the Red Sun, can there be a world circling it? By that, I don't mean a planet, plain and simple — but a particular planet, one that is Earth-like in character and has intelligent life upon it. The life doesn't have to be humanoid, of course, but it should be "life as we know it" — nucleic acid and protein, build up in a watery background.

Let's see, then — Suppose we have an Earth-like planet to begin with (and I have a strong temptation to use "Terroid" as a synonym for "Earth-like" even though I don't think this has ever been done).

A Terroid planet can't be too close to a star, or its ocean will boil; and it can't be too far from a star or its ocean will freeze, and, in either case, Terroid life would be impossible.

Since Betelgeuse is, on the average, a star with 425 times the diameter of our Sun, we know that our Terroid planet will have to be much farther from it than Earth is from the Sun. As a first approximation, let's place the planet at such a distance that Betelgeuse will have the same apparent size in its sky, as our Sun has in Earth's sky.

In that case, the planet would have to be at an average distance of 63,500,000,000 kilometres from Betelgeuse (1/15th of a light-year), or over ten times the average distance of Pluto from our Sun.

If there were a planet at such a distance from our Sun, it would complete one revolution about the Sun in about 8,742 Earth years.

Betelgeuse, however, which is about 16 times as massive as our Sun, would whip such a distant planet faster along its orbit than our Sun could. The planet we are imagining about Betelgeuse would complete one revolution about its distant but massive star in but one-fourth the time it would have taken to circle our Sun. Its period of revolution about Betelgeuse would be 2,185 Earth years.

Does it matter that the planet's period of revolution would be over two millenia long?

Suppose it is just like our Earth. Suppose its orbit is circular, that it rotates about its axis in 24 hours, that is has an axial tilt like ours, and so on. It would then have seasons like ours, but each season would be five centuries long. *Too* long, of course. The polar regions would have centuries of continuous light and then centuries of continuous darkness.

Well, then, imagine the axis upright, 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of night everywhere. The polar regions would undoubtedly have permanent ice caps that might extend far into the temperate zones without a hot summer to do a lot of melting, but the tropic regions would be fine. It would seem we are all set, but—

No good!

Betelgeuse is red, not white. Its surface temperature is 3200 K, and not the 5800 K of our Sun. Size for size, Betelgeuse's surface would deliver only 1/43 the total light and heat of our Sun's. It might look just as large as the Sun in its planet's sky, but it would be a cold sun by our standards so that the planet's ocean would freeze and Terroid life would be impossible.

In that case, let's move the Terroid planet inward. (The imagination is a powerful tool.) Forget about having Betelgeuse appear the size of our Sun, but let it expand as the planet moves nearer until the increased area of its surface makes up for its coolness.

We must move inward until the apparent area of Betelgeuse in the Terroid sky is 43 times that of our Sun in Earth's sky, and Betelgeuse's apparent diameter, therefore, 6 1/2 times that of our Sun. That means we must imagine the Terroid planet at an average distance of 9,680,000,000 kilometres from Betelgeuse, or only 1.6 times the distance of Pluto from our Sun.

At this distance, Betelgeuse would seem to be about 3.5 degrees in diameter and it would seem bloated indeed to our Sun-accustomed eyes, but it would deliver only the proper amount of light and heat.

To be sure, the light would be different in quality. It would be reddish in color, and, to our eyes, less satisfactory. However, the living organisms on Betelgeuse's planet would, presumably, be adapted to the star's radiation range. Their eyes would be more sensitive to red than ours are and would respond some distance into the infra-red (and, presumably, be unaffected by short-wave light that would be present in only small quantities after all in Betelgeuse-light.) To Terroid eyes, Betelgeuse's light would ap-

pear white, and organisms possessing those eyes would be perfectly contented.

What's more, the period of revolution would be shorter under these conditions, and would be only 130 Earth years long. A slight axial tipping would be bearable and might reduce the polar ice-cover appreciably.

Sounds great, doesn't it? No, it's no good!

Our Sun is a stable star, unchanging in size and in the amount of radiation it delivers. Sure, it is spottier at some times than at others, and in recent years there have been some observations that have led astronomers to think that its size is changing very slightly with time, but these changes are trivial in comparison with the case of Betelgeuse, which, as I pointed out last month, pulsates markedly — and irregularly.

I said that Betelgeuse is 425 times the diameter of the Sun, but that is *on the average.* It can swell up till it is 500 times the diameter of the Sun (sometimes even more) or shrink till it is only 350 times the diameter of the Sun (sometimes even less).

The planet we are imagining to be circling Betelgeuse would therefore see the star with an apparent diameter of 3.5 degrees only on the average. That diameter would vary from 4.2 degrees to 2.9 degrees. At the maximum diameter, Betelgeuse's apparent area in the sky would be twice what it was at minimum diameter, and it would deliver twice the radiation at maximum as at minimum.

This means that our imaginary planet is going to suffer enormously hot periods of times and enormously cold ones even if its orbit about Betelgeuse is circular and its axis is upright. I suspect, in fact, that the temperature variations on the planet would be too great for life as we know it to develop.

But does its orbit have to be circular? Might we not imagine a rather elliptical orbit so arranged that the planet approaches Betelgeuse just at the time when the star is contracting and delivering less light and heat, then moves away from Betelgeuse just as it is expanding and delivering more?

It would be asking much of coincidence to suppose that the planet rushes in and skids out again in just the proper synchronization to keep its temperature fairly steady, but I wouldn't hesitate to imagine it just because it's unlikely.

The trouble is that it isn't just unlikely; it's *impossible!*

I said that the planet would be circling Betelgeuse in 130 years. No matter how highly elliptical the orbit might be, the period of revolution would

still be 130 years if the average distance from Betelgeuse remained 9,680,000,000 kilometres. That means it would be relatively close to Betelgeuse for something less than 65 years. The reason for this is that the planet would move at a faster than average orbital speed when closer to Betelgeuse and at a slower than average one when farther. The more highly elliptical the orbit, the more unbalanced the times it would spend near and far.

There is no way of making this situation match the expansion and contraction of Betelgeuse unless the star expanded and contracted with a 130-year period and with the expanded part of the cycle somewhat longer than the contracted part.

The pulsation period of Betelgeuse isn't even close. It takes about 150 days for Betelgeuse to expand from minimum size to maximum, and about 100 to 150 days for it to contract from maximum to minimum again. In one orbital period of the planet about Betelgeuse, then, the star would expand and contract about 270 times. To balance this, you would have to wave the planet in and out, in varying periods and to a varying extent in order to match, exactly, the unpredictable variations in the rate and extent of Betelgeuse's expansion and contraction.

Apparently, the irregularity of Betelgeuse traces back to the fact that it is turbulent and "boiling." Hot bubbles of helium from the interior periodically rise to the surface and produce enormous hot spots, causing the star to expand. The variables involved are too many to allow much in the way of regularity.

You might argue, of course, that Earth has a great deal of variation in its weather, too, and yet life exists here.

But then, Earth's temperature variations as a whole are far less than those that Betelgeuse's planet would be compelled to endure, and, furthermore, there are large regions on Earth where the temperature is quite equable over long periods of time. It is difficult to see how this would be true of Betelgeuse's planet, too.

Betelgeuse is enormously unstable in other ways as well. It shows signs of possessing colossal prominences and of being the source of a huge stellar wind. This all argues that Betelgeuse is not going to remain in its present form for long, as compared with ordinary stars, like our Sun, which can continue, relatively unchanged, for billions of years.

Compare Betelgeuse's wind to that of the Sun. The Sun is constantly losing mass, as streams of particles (chiefly protons — the nuclei of

hydrogen atoms, which make up the bulk of the Sun's substance) speed outward in all directions. About a million metric tons of matter are lost to the Sun each *second* through this solar wind, but Betelgeuse loses matter at a billion times that rate.

If Betelgeuse were to continue to lose mass through its stellar wind at the present rate, it would be entirely gone in 16,000,000 years. The chances are, though, that long before this Betelgeuse would either have blown off enough matter to be converted into a condensed star surrounded by a planetary nebula, or would have blown up in a supernova. I suspect that a large red giant can only remain in that state about 2,000,000 years.

That might seem ample time to you, considering that human civilization has lasted less than 10,000 years. A period of 2,000,000 years is two hundred times that long.

No good! We're not talking about the development of civilization, but the development of life. Life appeared on Earth perhaps 3,500,000,000 years ago, and multicellular life perhaps 1,000,000,000 years ago, and land life only 400,000,000 years ago. It took two and a half billion years just to pass beyond the one-celled stage, and that is over a thousand times as long as the lifetime of a red giant.

You might say that evolution just happened to be extremely slow on Earth and that it might be faster on Betelgeuse's planet.

Well, we can't tell whether the rate of evolution on Earth is, or is not, typical of life in the Universe generally because Earth's life is the only sample of the phenomenon we know. Yet from what we know of evolution, it seems hard to suppose that it can be anything but a very slow process. It is difficult to believe that intelligent life could evolve during the brief existence of a red giant.

In that case, let's remember that Betelgeuse wasn't a red giant to begin with. Before it was a red giant, it was on the main sequence. That is, it was a stable star like the Sun, subsisting by hydrogen fusion at the core. It was then a relatively small star — more massive than the Sun, and therefore somewhat larger, brighter and hotter, but no giant.

Why, then, should we suppose that life had to begin while Betelgeuse was a red giant? Would it not make sense to suppose that life began when it was on the main sequence, and that life developed to intelligence, and to high technology, during that period.

Then, when Betelgeuse came to the end of its main-sequence life, and began to evolve into a red giant, the intelligent inhabitants of the original

Terroid planet (which would, of course, be circling Betelgeuse at a greater distance than Earth is from the Sun, since Betelgeuse was the hotter star — but not at a terribly greater distance) would have the space-travelling capacity to move farther outward. The movement would be in stages, because although the evolution to the red-giant stage is rapid as compared to change during the main sequence, it is still quite slow on the human-life scale.

Thus, when our Sun begins evolving to the red-giant stage, human beings (or our evolved descendents), if still in existence, might move out to Mars; then, hundreds of thousands of years later, to Europa; then, a million years later, to Titan, and so on. Betelgeuse, being more massive, would evolve more rapidly than the Sun would, but there would still be no hurry.

Therefore, the distant planet of Betelgeuse's red-giant stage would not carry intelligent life that had developed there, but life that had *migrated* from some inner planet that had been physically vaporized and absorbed by Betelgeuse as that star had expanded.

No good!

In our Solar system, the worlds relatively close to the Sun are essentially rock, with or without a metallic core, and could conceivably support long-term human life, either naturally (as Earth does) or after considerable technological modification as the Moon or Mars might.

The worlds beyond the asteroid belt, which will survive the Solar red giant, are, however, of fundamentally different composition. The large worlds are chiefly gaseous, while the small worlds are chiefly icy. Such worlds do not offer much hope as long-term refuges. The gaseous ones are too entirely alien. The icy ones don't have the rocky and metallic elements we need.

Of course, the Solar red giant may conceivably heat up Jupiter to the point where much of it will be dispersed, and we might dream that a rocky core will be exposed that would be a fresh, new Earth. Unfortunately, we're not sure that there is a rocky core at all, or how large it might be — or, for that matter, whether even a heated Jupiter may not cling together more or less intact, thanks to its large gravitational field.

Of the large Jovian satellites, Ganymede and Callisto are icy, and, at the red-giant time, may melt and disperse. Io, to be sure, is rocky, but lacks water. Callisto is rocky, and has a world-girdling surface ocean (now frozen, at least on top). The red giant may melt and vaporize the ocean, which might thus be lost into outer space.

Beyond Jupiter, everything should remain intact, but the worlds are not really inviting.

There's every reason to think that this general pattern — rocky worlds near a star, and gaseous or icy worlds far from a star — is common in planetary systems. We might expect, then, that it is a rule that life begins relatively close to a star and that in red-giant time, retreat to the outer regions would involve such extensive terraformation as to be prohibitive.

But are we not putting short-sighted limits to the possible advance of technology. Terraforming may be very simple to a technologically advanced species. Considering the rate of technological advance in the past hundred years (from the unpowered glider to rocket probes taking close-up pictures of Saturn's rings) what might we not expect of ourselves in another hundred years, let alone a thousand?

And who says we have to be satisfied, as refuges, with whatever world happens to exist in the outer reaches of a planetary system? They are only resource accumulations.

We can picture humanity, as the time for the solar red-giant approaches, to be living in artificial space settlements, each as comfortable and roomy as Earth's surface, and much more secure. There might never be any thought of returning to any world. One would merely move settlements farther from the Sun, little by little, year by year, keeping pace with the upward creep of solar-radiation intensity.

We might even picture humanity as saving worlds from Solar destruction, pushing them further from the Sun every once in a while, in order to keep them as resources.

Therefore, we might picture the life that originally developed relatively near Betelgeuse in its main-sequence days, as now living in large settlements nearly ten billion kilometres from the star, with rescued asteroids and satellites also in orbit. We might even suppose the inhabitants to have methods for flattening out the differences in radiation received as Betelgeuse expands and contracts. They could shield the settlements and deflect most of the radiation as Betelgeuse heats up, and could gather and concentrate radiation as it cools down.

No good!

All of this depends on whether life could really have begun and developed in the Betelgeuse planetary system while that star was still on the main sequence.

Let's consider our Sun, for instance, and, in doing so, let's not deal in billions of years. It is hard to grasp such enormous periods of time. Let us

define "6 long-years," instead, as equal to 1,000,000,000 ordinary years. On this scale "1 long-second" is equal to 31 years.

Using this "long-standard," the Solar system would condense out of a primordial swirl of dust and gas in about 7 long-months and enter its existence on the main sequence. It would remain on the main sequence for about 72 long-years (about the average lifetime of a human being, which is why I chose this particular scale) then flash through the red-giant stage in no more than 4 *long-days*, and collapse to a white-dwarf, in which state it will remain indefinitely, slowly cooling off.

If we look a little closer at the main-sequence portion of the Sun's lifetime, and do so in long-years, here are the results.

The planets and other cold bodies of the Solar system took on their present shape only slowly as they collected the debris in their orbits. The bombardment of this debris has left its mark in the form of the meteoric craters that scar every world where they are not eroded or obscured by such factors as air, water, volcanic lava, living activity, and so on. It was not till the Sun was 3 long-years old that this bombardment was essentially over and that Earth and the other worlds were in their present shape.

When the Sun was 6 long-years old, the first traces of molecules, complicated enough to be considered as living, appeared on the Earth.

When the Sun was 21 long-years old, the first multicellular life formed and, at 24 long-years of age, the fossil record begins. The Sun was a little past 25 long-years old when life crawled out on land, and it is now a little past 27 1/2 long-years old. By the time it is 60 long-years old, it may be a little too hot for Earth to be comfortable, and human beings or their evolved descendants (if still around) may begin the retreat outward. By the time it is 72 long-years old, our Sun will be a red giant, though not one as large as Betelgeuse is now.

As it happens, not all stars remain on the main-sequence an equal length of time. In general, the more massive a star is, the greater its nuclear fuel supply. The more massive it is, however, the more rapidly it must consume that fuel supply if it is to generate enough heat and radiation pressure to keep itself from collapsing under the pull of its more intense gravitational field.

The rate of fuel expenditure rises more rapidly than the fuel supply does, as the mass goes up. It follows that the more massive a star is, the shorter its time on the main sequence and the more rapidly it reaches the red-giant stage.

Consider the red-dwarfs, which make up three quarters of all the stars. These are relatively small stars with masses from 1/5 to 1/2 that of the Sun,

and just massive enough to produce internal pressures capable of igniting nuclear reactions. They dribble out their relatively small fuel supply so slowly that they remain on the main sequence for lengths of from 450 long-years up to as much as 1200 long-years.

These are enormous life spans when you think that the Universe itself is thought to be not more than 90 long-years old at the present time. This means that every red-dwarf in existence is still on the main sequence. Not one has yet had time to reach the red-giant stage.

On the other hand, stars that are more massive than the Sun have a shorter stay on the main sequence. Procyon, for instance, which is about 1.5 times as massive as the Sun will remain on the main sequence for a total of 24 long-years. Sirius, with a mass of more than 2.5 times that of the Sun, will be on the main sequence for only 3 long-years.

And what about Betelgeuse, which is 16 times the mass of the Sun? Well, it remains on the main sequence for about 3 *long-weeks.* Compare this with the 6 long-years (a period over a hundred times as long) that elapsed before the first trace of life came into being on Earth. Even if our Solar system was phenomenally slow in developing life, it is difficult to imagine that life could develop in less than a hundredth the time.

And it isn't just the first traces of life we are interested in. We expect life to evolve *slowly* into more and more complicated forms until some species with enough intelligence to develop an advanced technology comes into being. It took Earth 27 long-years to do it. Could the Betelgeuse planet have done it in 3 long-weeks, not much more than 1/500th that period?

It simply seems beyond any possibility that life could have developed on any planet circling Betelgeuse, or that there could be any home-grown life there now. (I say "home-grown" because I don't to want to exclude the possibility that some beings with advanced technology, who may have originated in some other stellar system, have established a scientific observatory in the outer reaches of the Betelgeuse system in order to study the red giant at close hand. (If such a station has life-forms aboard, they had better be gone and a light-year away on the day Betelgeuse explodes.)

So there is no World of the Red Sun, in the Betelgeuse-sense, alas, and we can't expect Terroid life to originate about any star appreciably more massive than our Sun. Stars that are appreciably less massive than our Sun are excluded for other reasons, which I may take up in a future essay.

That leaves us only with stars reasonably close to the mass of our Sun as suitable for Terroid life-development. Fortunately, such stars make up ten percent of the total, and that leaves us considerable leeway.

Here is the third of four stories in Ian Watson's compelling series titled "The Book of the River," in which Yaleen finds herself on the mysterious western shore of the mighty river that divides her world.

A Walk To Manhome, and Away

BY
IAN WATSON

SYNOPSIS

Yaleen's world comprises the 700-league east bank of a mighty river, which no one can cross because of the mysterious 'black current.' Her brother alone has managed to cross, and been burnt alive by the river-hating 'Sons of Adam' in the west. Fleeing from this memory, Yaleen sails south to the jungle city of Jangali where she rescues her boatmistress from a plot by cult women who use a fungus drug, to poison the black current. As a reward, Yaleen is chosen to sail out to the current from southernmost Tambimatu on New Year's Eve to take samples of the current for use in riverguild ceremonies — a singular honor for one so young. But the current crazes her — and she comes to her senses washed up on the unknown far shore, in wild jungle.

* * *

I had no idea how far I'd traveled. Or how many days it had taken. Seventy? A hundred? I'd lost count. There was no way to measure the leagues. On this sort of a hell-walk a league seemed an impossibly ambitious unit of measurement. I might have accounted for thirty — or for five score. I was hungry, filthy, and fairly crazy.

Inventory for a hell-walk: stout river boots (good for a long journey), a pair of breeches, and a blouse, now tattered. Plus a pocket knife and comb and a piece of string. Plus, of course, my wits.

I didn't eat well, but at least I did consume enough to fuel me to tramp and thrash my way onward. I ate tubers and fungi and fruit. I suffered stomachaches, and spent one whole day curled up in misery. However, I

did remember Lalo's lore of the jungle. This jungle wasn't the same as the Jangali type, at least not at first. Even so, I managed to avoid fatal poisoning. I reminded myself that other creatures happily thrive on a diet of grubs and beetles and live frogs — down on gut level I was an animal, too.

The first haul through the spinach puree was the worst; but I still had reserves of fat on me then.

I mentioned my wits as an asset.

In one respect my wits were quite disordered. For wit means knowledge, but what did I know? I knew the east bank from Tambimatu to Umdala. Of the west bank I knew nothing.

Yet the word *nothing* hardly sums up the quality of my ignorance. I hadn't exactly known Jangali or Port Barbra before I sailed to them. Yet I knew where they were! I knew they were there. I knew what *The Book of the River* said about them.

Here on the west bank *The Book of the River* meant nothing at all. It was as if the world had changed into another one entirely. And my map of it was blank.

This sheer blankness was the first shock I had to cope with. For the first time in all my life no reference points existed. My only signpost was the river itself — when I could see it, which wasn't all that often. Once or twice when I was able to "camp" near the water at dusk, I spotted a tiny masthead lantern far away; that was all I ever spied by way of distant nightlights. My only real clue to my whereabouts came from the changing nature of the jungle itself: the decline of puree, the rise of occasional rubyvein and gildenwood, then at last the halls of jacktrees and hogannies.

Yet the jungle seemed endless and chaotic. When I thought I had passed through one type of vegetation, the same would reappear. I would be forced to seek the river to reassure myself that I wasn't simply stumbling back the way I had already come.

While in another respect: I had no *human* reference points. I was utterly alone with myself. More so than any prisoner shut up in a room with no windows, because that at least would imply the existence of people outside. I, on the other hand, could go anywhere I wished; and it seemed there would still be no one to speak to or to hear my voice, ever again.

When you're shoving your way through jungle all day long, you don't spend a whole lot of time meditating or soul-searching in any very lucid or logical way. Yet, your brain does churn over obsessively for hours on end. And what I was thinking to myself (if you can thus dignify the process whereby the milk of thought gets churned into stiff sticky butter that clogs your head up!), what I was thinking was that in all the time since I'd joined the *Spry Goose* in Pecawar, I hadn't really been communicating with people.

Oh, I'd been talking: to Jambi,

Klare, Lalo, you name it. I hadn't related, though. I'd been detached. I'd been viewing myself as a character in a tableau.

Here's Yaleen at Spanglestream, admiring the phosphorescent water! Here she is at Croakers' Bayou: behold the swamps and stilt-trees! And here she is shinning up a tree in Jangali...

Even when I rescued Marcialla from that trapeze, I'd been a sort of actor or emblem of a person, like someone pictured on a fortune card.

So it seemed to my churning brain.

I tried to count the number of conversations I could remember in any detail from the previous few months, compared with gabbier days of yore. This might be a more rewarding pursuit than trying to reckon leagues.

It wasn't. There weren't all that many.

If I can put it this way, borrowing from those critics writing in the Ajelobo newspapers, what I'd been living all that time had been narrative rather than dialogue. I'd made myself into something of a third person, so that what happened to *her* didn't fully affect *me*. I hadn't realized this, no more than I'd noticed until Ajelobo that I'd been doing without sex for months.

People! How I yearned for them, now that there were none!

"Oh, Hasso, where are you? You who were gentle and witty!" I cried out, silencing the idiot jungle noise; then I stifled my cries in panic lest some savage Son of Adam heard me.

Many were the times I raved and rambled on to myself, and started imaginary dialogues — abortive ones that rarely got far beyond the opening gambits; whilst I plowed through the puree, and subsequent jungle. Surviving. Surviving!

I guess in such a situation you either go mad or else you grow up. You become yourself at last, your true self. Because there's no one else available — and "yourself" had better be big enough to bail you out of this scrape!

I grew up — I thought. At other times I wasn't so sure; and regarding this whole period I can't really guarantee the validity of my feelings or supposed discoveries about myself.

Sometimes when I stopped to camp — in the crook of a tree or under a bush — and when I'd been lucky enough to grab a bellyful of crab, worm meat, and tubers, I loosened my breeches belt. I masturbated. And I thought hectically: not of insouciant Hasso or of my happy dalliance with sweet Tam in Aladalia in the days of what seemed my youth. But of the wearing of black robes. Of the private lives of humiliated women. Of a great grim Son of Adam who owned me, and was noble, but a brute. Black hateful fantasies, there!

Was this adult behavior? Perhaps in a perverse way it strengthened my spirit. With my playful, clever fingers I embraced a hateful future. Coming to terms: you could call it that. I think I

was sick with loneliness, and this was the only way I could discharge the accumulating poison. I think that to survive such an ordeal — one that just goes on and on remorselessly — you need something to hone you, to inflame you, to make you into a weapon, a mad thing. I could hardly revenge myself on the trees. I could hardly promise myself vengeance against any known individual. So instead I imagined humiliators and enslavers; and thus I advanced to meet them, day by day. I embraced what I most feared, to screw up the courage to continue.

By now I had somewhat discarded the bright idea that I was going to stand opposite Verrino Spire waving my torn blouse till some miraculous rescue party wafted across to me...

My first menstruation of the journey I coped with, using wads of moss. My second flow was thinner; hunger and exhaustion were drying me up.

A heroic slog through wild jungles for weeks on end ... Do you expect battles against giant reptiles with crystalline eyes (me armed with my pocket knife) — instead of a tale of what I did in my pants?

Well, there *were* incidents. Not many, but some.

There was the day when I stepped on what seemed to be a bed of moss. It was thick green scum, instead. I plunged through into a shaft of water. My flailing left arm was seized by teeth like needles. I never saw what was trying to eat me. Terrified, choking on the scummy water, I battered my free fist against the source of pain. Which let go. I wallowed and thrashed my way back onto dry land.

Blood welled from inflamed stab marks. But I spotted one of those moss-mats that Lalo had assured me would staunch and disinfect. Leaping, I tore handfuls loose, to bind round the wound with my piece of string.

The remedy must have worked. My arm ached, but it didn't swell up or turn purple or throb with pus and poison.

Then there was the day I met a monster. It must have been the great-grandma of all croakers. It squatted in my path like a huge leathery boulder, high as my chest. Its eyes bulged at me unblinkingly. Its throat membrane pulsed.

"Arrk! Arrk!" I heard from directly behind. Naturally, I turned to look. At the last moment I recalled the ventriloquist trickery of croakers and hastily converted my turn into a leap aside, and a roll and scramble through undergrowth.

Crash! Where I'd been a few seconds earlier, now the great-grandma croaker sat slumped, aquiver. Its eyes rotated. It shuffled about.

"Urrk! Urrk!" — again from behind. Scrambling up, I fled.

Nor must I forget the day of the piranha-mice.

A sudden hush came over the jun-

gle, stilling the usual modest anarchic racket. In place of this, a moment later, I heard a rustling as of wind-blown autumn leaves up north in Aladalia or Firelight. A surging.

Ahead, undergrowth rippled. A gray living mass was advancing at speed, replacing the green. A million tiny creatures were gobbling everything in their path. Leaping, scuttling, climbing, dropping back — and chewing, always chewing. Leaves, flowers, and moss became raggy in a trice, and vanished. Some thrashings and brief squeals marked where more mobile items of dinner took exception to being eaten. Something the size of a cat scrabbled for a tree. I couldn't identify it — it wore a second coat of squirming gray. The unlucky victim clawed bark, then fell back into the mass beneath. It seemed to deflate in an instant as if it had been filled only with air.

This happened very rapidly. In another few seconds I would become hapless prey myself. The wave front of hunger was nearly at my feet. I, too, scrambled up a tree, with a few gray scouts already hanging onto my boots. I crushed the ravenous little bodies against the trunk. I clawed and climbed higher. Obviously, the things were omnivorous: they would eat anything. Even in my half-starved state I was a great prize of meat and guts.

I was terrified. How high would they climb? The gray mass heaped up around the base of my refuge. Parts of it made tentative leaps and forays. Tiny teeth darted. Hanging on precariously, I stamped and punched as best I could, bruising one fist, then the other. A thin, eager whistling rose from below.

But then — as though clouds had obscured some inner sun that lit up all their vicious little lives — the scouts stopped climbing. The mass subsided. The whole gray carpet ceased its flexing and writhing. It settled. It lay still.

Quickly comatose. Asleep.

The food run was over. I was of no further interest. Nothing was, but slumberous digestion.

If I slid down the trunk right away, crushing little bodies by the score as I broke out of the cordon, mightn't they rouse again as one creature?

And if I waited ... tiny bodies, huge appetites! Mightn't they wake up just as hungry in another hour or so?

I brooded a bit, then worked my way up even higher, to where a neighboring tree tangled with my own sanctuary. I transferred; then from there with difficulty to a third tree. After about half an hour of awkward maneuvers I descended on the far side of the sleeping pack.

For the next league or so I found a convenient roadway through the jungle waiting for me, stripped bare by the beasts. Marking their last few dozen food sprints and mass snoozes. Presumably, the total slumber that overcame the mice fooled other creatures into forgetting their peril. The impromptu road swung this way and

that, and latterly vegetation had begun to reassert itself. I had to leave my tunnel when it suddenly veered off at a right angle.

Lalo had said nothing to me about these hungry hoardes. Maybe they lived only in western jungles. In which case, what else lurked hereabouts? After quitting the corridor I was nervous and wary for a while, but no further animal prodigies crossed my path. The jungle cackled at me as if planning dirty deeds. Yet, I never saw the owners of these voices; they did not follow me.

On the umpteenth day at last I came upon a trail — one that hadn't been made by piranha-mice. This was much narrower and had been hacked, not nibbled. Nor did it run nearly as straight — if spasmodically so — as the single-minded tunnel of the rodents. It took the line of least resistance amidst tree trunks and tangles. Generally it ran east to west. I followed this trail inland, hoping that it would connect with some north-south route.

I could never see very far ahead because of the constant twists and turns. After marching along for a league or so, I suddenly heard voices, coming from around the next corner or the one after.

Hastily thrusting aside, I concealed myself behind a mass of dinner-plate leaves full of peepholes.

Only moments after, three men came along the path. Large boxes were strapped to their shoulders. All of the men sported untidy beards. They were dressed in baggy linen trousers tucked into boots, and coarse cloth shirts. Two wore floppy hats, one a white-spotted bandanna. All were armed, with knives and tarnished machetes. I didn't like the look of them one bit. These were wild men.

And I could have safely gone on not liking their looks — but for where I had chosen to hide.

A burning needle stabbed my hand as it rested on the soil, then another. I didn't cry out. I only grasped involuntarily and snatched my hand away — to tear two insects loose: red things the size of a fingernail. That was enough: the intake of breath, the rustle of leaves.

Boxes were shed. A knife came out. A machete was brandished. Boots crashed toward me; and I was hauled out upon the trail.

"What do we have here?" the hatless one said in wonder. "A girl?" His hair was a wild bush of bright ginger; as was his beard. He said "gairl."

"Obviously!" Blackbeard ruffled the tatters of my blouse. "In men's raiment. Mostly."

"Stop it," I squeaked.

"Runaway?" asked Rangy Blond, the third man. "Witch?" He said "roonaway" and "weetch."

I was released, and Gingerbush put his knife away. "You a witch?"

"No, no." But of course in their eyes I supposed I was. I was a woman of the river.

"Do you think she'd tell?" snapped Rangy Blond. "What are you?" he shouted at me.

"If you don't think I'll tell, why ask me?"

"Ho, spirited!" from Gingerbush.

"Queer accent," remarked Blackbeard. "Audibly."

Rangy Blond gripped me by the shoulders, and I thought he was going to tear off the remains of my blouse. Maybe all my dark fantasies of the past few weeks had come home to roost. He shook me instead. "*What — are — you?*"

I stared into this wild man's eyes, suddenly inspired. "You're *upset.* Scared. *I* shouldn't be here. But neither should you!"

"Perceptive," said Blackbeard.

Rangy Blond seemed incensed. "Shouldn't be here? Why not? Who says? We're prospecting for jemralds." Presumably those were precious stones.

"Why should't *she* be here?" mused Blackbeard. "A deaf man could tell you she ain't one of us. So where's she from? 'Tis obvious. She's from over the river. Ain't you?" He grinned — though not a cruel grin. "Shipwrecked, eh? You all use ships."

"Boats," I corrected him unthinkingly. And he chuckled in triumph. After all those weeks of isolation, this was a game too fast for me. Blackbeard might look thuggish, but he was nimble-witted.

He turned to his companions. "Brothers, we've found us treasure."

"O.K.," I admitted. "I'm from the other shore. I'm a riverwoman. Do you want to know about it?"

Blackbeard laughed uproariously. "Do we, Brothers? Do we just!" He calmed. "So she came across the Satan-channel. ... Doesn't mean as how she was wrecked, though..." Abruptly, he caught hold of my hand and twisted it. "Sting bites, eh? You need ointment." Letting go, he unlatched his box and burrowed. Producing a glass jar, he salved my skin with something that stank. "Nasty buggers, those. So which is it? Boatwreck? Or sacrifice? Tossed overboard into Satan's black lips? Or a *spy?* Found a way over, set up a camp down south?"

Why had they hacked this trail toward the river? Simply to search for jewels? No ... that was only their cover story — to hide what they were up to, from the eyes of other men. I felt sure of it.

After the comparative monotony of the past weeks, a lot happened in a little while.

The three men cached their burdens beside the trail and escorted me back to their camp a league to the west, which a couple more men guarded. They gave me a new coarse shirt to replace my blouse, and fed me to bursting point on a stew of meat and veg poured over tapica; then questioned me.

The camp consisted of a crude log cabin and a pair of tents, in a clearing with a stream nearby. Another narrow trail ran away northwest.

The "Brothers" didn't exactly introduce themselves, but it soon became evident that Blackbeard's name was Andri. Rangy Blond was Harld, and Gingerbush was Jothan. They weren't actually brothers, except perhaps in roguery. The two men who had been left to guard the camp were less savory specimens: one with teeth missing, the other with a badly scarred left cheek. This pair eyed me but kept their distance, and weren't included in our discussions.

Andri paid intense attention to what I said, questioning me where he didn't understand and demanding the meaning of words he didn't know. I must have been interrogated for two hours. I even told about Capsi and Verrino. Yet, Andri never went into unnecessary detail; he blocked out the general picture.

"Right," he said at last. "Yaleen of the River, I believe you. Mainly because no one could be such a thorough-going liar, except maybe Jothan here. Lucky you fell in with the likes of us. Saved your life, doubtless. Certainly saved you much pain. Wised up you have been to our ways by those watchers of yours. But not enough. Never enough."

"Was it entirely luck?" I asked. "That I fell in with *you*?"

He wagged a finger. "A story for a story, you won't get. Don't expect it."

"Because you're *danger*," said Harld.

"Potentially," agreed Andri. "S'posing she fell into the wrong hands. S'posing she blabbed her mouth, when those hands started twisting her."

"But I'm treasure to you, aren't I? More precious than jemralds." I'd decided to stop being a lost waif, and to capitalize on my assets.

"Jemralds to one man; dung to most others, only fit for burning. After you'd shat yourself, in the cellars. S'posing you tried to hold back, like a costive. The Brotherhood would always think you was holding back."

"You don't have to try and frighten me."

"Spunky words, girl. But foolish. I simply touch on the truesoil."

"Do you. And which one man might I be jemralds to? The person you work for?"

Andri picked his teeth a bit. "Truesoil is," he said, "you won't be learning no names till you meet their owners. What you know not, you can't babble."

"What's all this 'truesoil' business?"

"Eh, don't know the word? Happen you wouldn't either! Truesoil is the gritty, the down to earth. It's the permitted land. Near the river is all falsesoil. A lot I'll have to tell you. Evidently."

Which is what he proceeded to do, commencing as night was falling — until I found myself being borne in his

arms into one of the tents, lantern-lit by Jothan. I'd flaked out.

Andri slid me into the luxury of a sleep-bag. That night I dreamed I was in an honest bunk aboard a friendly boat.

My education continued the next morning, after I'd crammed down a huge breakfast. Harld seemed edgy and restless, but Andri insisted on wising me up adequately about life in the west before he would contemplate our setting off (for destination undisclosed).

"She has to know what not to say," he impressed on Harld. "What not to do. We'll get her a robe as soon as we can. Right now we have to robe her *mind.*"

And learn I did: ten thousandfold what anyone else in the east had even guessed of the western world.

Men had come to this world, said Andri, from another one called Eeden, a name unknown to me. And when people died here, their minds returned to Eeden. The Westerners were convinced that their physical bodies were artificial dummies or puppets; and these dummies were animated from a distance. This idea seemed a wholly lunatic one, but it did become more plausible — or at least self-consistent — the more Andri explained.

According to their "Deotheorists," real people couldn't live on any world except Eeden, for a hundred reasons that had to do with differences in air and water, foodstuffs, diseases, whatever. Consequently, the "God-Mind" had sent artificial bodies forth to a hundred worlds, capable of breeding and reproducing. A "psylink" existed between Eeden and our own world, such that babies were born back in Eeden, yet they lived out their lives — their mental lives — in puppet flesh here. Meanwhile, their original bodies lay entranced in cold caverns underneath Eeden, their growth halted at the infant stage, each to be "revived" when the corresponding puppet body died — as fully experienced "cherubs" whose "afterlives" in Eeden would enrich the tapestry of that world gloriously, complexly, subtly. The cherubs would bring home to Eeden a hundred different histories, a hundred strange and varied ways of life, from all over the universe.

Yet, here on this particular world of ours, Man had encountered the Snake of the River, an evil infiltrating creature intent on subverting the "psycolonist" and invading Eeden, only true Home of Humanity. The Snake worked its wiles especially through women, due to subtle differences in glands and blood and brain — which made all females potential agents of the Snake, Satan. Once infested, people could be purged only by pain and fire; which of course tended to kill them.

Naturally, I was puzzled about the nature of this God-Mind, who had created human life here, and whose all-

powerful will could cross the cosmos, only to be thwarted.

It appeared that "God" was a higher intelligence of "an ineffable nature." Inexpressible, incomprehensible by mere mortals. One day he would rule the whole universe, and create it. (Which meant that he both did rule, already, and didn't — the Deotheorists' ideas of time were really weird.) The arrival of dummy-people in the demesne of the Snake had awakened that other divine (or devilish) force to similar ambitions. Now there was a second contender for captaincy of the ship of stars.

What's more, the supreme God-Mind, the Lord of Creation, had himself somehow been produced out of the mind of Man; created, given birth to.

So.

This was both crazier, and more rational, than I'd expected. It wasn't simply that the Sons of Adam lorded it over women. They did — with a vengeance. But they actually had a reason. True, as far as I could make out, the average tenor of western life was cruelty, superstition, and oppression, pure and simple. Self-interest and rabid prejudice — coupled with distinctly backward circumstances. I noted how Jothan and Harld ogled greedily at some items I related of life in the east, ordinary items we took for granted. Still, there was a rationale behind their wretched system. The God-Mind versus the Vile Snake.

I feared it might make me spew to play host to such a hostile concept of the black current, I who had drunk of it. To my surprise, it didn't. I was far from any eastern town or boat, far from the river, far from the community of women. I felt as if a pervasive influence had withdrawn from me; or perhaps it was just lying low, keeping watch.

That afternoon Andri, Jothan, and I set off along the trail to the northwest. We left Harld and the other two men to get on with whatever business my arrival had interrupted — business that just had to be intimately connected with the forbidden river. Whose daughter had now fallen into their hands like a ripe peach.

Ripe? Ah, well, perhaps "ripe" is an exaggeration! After my many weeks alone on sparse rations I was more like a shriveled twig. Still, they loaded me up for the journey. I realized only later that they had burdened me lightly compared with the way a woman of the west would ordinarily have been weighed down. Andri and Jothan wore heavier backpacks.

Yet, I stepped out relatively lightly. The trek wasn't so bad now that there was a definite path to follow, in the company of guides. That evening we made genuine camp, amidst jungle that seemed far less wild and chaotic.

Marching in single file had allowed few opportunities for chattering. When we sat round a fire that evening Andri and I talked again, whilst Jothan

busied himself boiling soup.

"Do you really think you're a puppet?" I pressed Andri. "Or a dummy-body, or whatever?"

He scratched his beard awhile. "Look: our forebears weren't born here, for a fact. If you plunge into water, does that turn you into a fish? Likewise, if you plunge into a foreign world, why should you suddenly be at home?"

"We *live* here. We are at home."

He nodded at the cook-pot. "Why should we be able to eat what's here, and live on it?"

"Well, we do."

"That's no answer."

"We must have brought a lot of things with us to eat. Chickens, for instance! Some ancient writings mention chickens."

"Do they? How d'you know they're the same sort of chickens, eh? And why should chickens be able to peck around and live here? Unless, girl, unless we've all of us — chickens *and* people — been made into the sort of bodies as can *live* here. The Deotheorists say if you just dump a man of Eeden down here on a strange world exactly as he is, he'll starve in a few days. He can't digest the local food. Or it poisons him. Same applies to the air and water."

"It couldn't have been *too* different here."

"Happen not. Otherwise, maybe we'd have needed scales on our skins, or shells on our backs."

"That's silly."

"No it ain't. We'd have been made differently. As would the chickens and cucumbers and everything else as came from Eeden. The Deotheorists say that all the kinds of life there are, are spelled out by different words. These aren't like our words, that we speak. They're very long magical words — so long, it would take you ten thousand pages to write but a single one of 'em. These words are written in our flesh. If you change the spelling, you change the shape of life.

"When we arrived here, whatever it was as brought us read all the words of *this* world back to the God-Mind. He thought about them, learned the language of life here, then he changed the spelling of our own words so as we would fit in.

"And on a hundred other worlds elsewhere, other words were read. And other shapes were born.

"Only the God-Mind can understand these words and change our spelling. It only takes him minutes. Hours at the most. It would take us hundreds of years. I'll warrant he changed our stomachs and our blood quite a bit. Though not our outward looks. We look the same as we would back in Eeden."

If the God-Mind hadn't changed our appearance, why assume that he had changed us in secret, hidden ways? This seemed to be a completely unnecessary theory, in high need of the "razor of logic" to cut it out. I said so.

"Why is the idea handed down, if it's unnecessary?" demanded Andri.

"Because it gives the Brotherhood an excuse to rule the roost."

He grinned broadly. "Ah, you've solved it all in a twinkling! Simplicity itself!" He leaned closer. "Simple as a fellow shoving his squirter in a woman and making a baby pop out nine months later! Would you care to explain just how a baby is made, eh? Or how does a seed make a plant? Come on: tell me the recipe."

"A plant makes itself out of soil and water. A baby makes itself out of its mother and the food she eats."

"How? How does it make itself?"

I knew how to *stop* a baby, with a draft of Safe. But actually I was floundering. "It starts out tiny and gets bigger."

"So this here fellow squirts a tiny baby into the woman, does he? Too tiny to see with the eye? How does *he* make it in the first place?"

"No, the woman has a tiny egg in her—"

"How does the egg become a person? What tells it?" Andri guffawed. "Look, girl: *words* — very long words written very small with a million million letters in each word — that's what makes a baby. The word of God. Made flesh." He gazed at me. "Don't have any such notions, do you? Never even give it a thought. Just get on living soft lives—"

"Hey, I resent that! Working a boat isn't any holiday."

"Like beasts, that don't question."

"We're beasts, are we? So now we come to the nub of it. What hatred you must feel for women! What a load of fear! Yes, I said *fear.* Let me tell you something, mister: you're no better than the rest of those Sons. Worse, probably. Whatever it is that *you're* after, you're screwing yourself up twice as bad."

"Maybe it is in Man's nature to torment himself, for truth. To strive."

I snorted. "And not in Woman's nature, I suppose."

"Yourself excluded. Naturally?"

This exchange seemed to be taking rather a vicious turn. Partly my own fault, I admit.

Just then Jothan cut in. "You've failed, girl. You wouldn't last ten minutes. You'd be in the ducking stool. Shrew. Scold. Argumentifier. Heretic. Disobeyer." Placidly, he stirred the soup. "Why, you ain't even doing the cooking."

Andri actually winked at me. " 'Tis true, what he says. You'll have to watch that tongue of yours. Or you'll end up pickled or cooked, yourself. The Brotherhood don't brook opinionated females. Us, of course, we're broad-minded. And we're still way out in no-man's-land."

"You'll have to act more appeasing," said Jothan. "Truesoil is, you'd better just stay shut up."

"O.K., point taken," I said. "No one's eavesdropping on us here. So, Andri, do you or don't you believe

that you're an artificial person, a dummy? Tell me: I'm fascinated."

"Whatever you start out believing, Yaleen, you'll believe to the end of your days — even if you convince yourself you've changed your mind a dozen times, and turned all your thoughts inside out. 'Tis true. You can't wash out the dye you're first dipped in. The best you can be is aware of this. Then at least you'll know what stains you always, even when you're going against the grain."

"Dipped in dye, is it?" And I had been dipped in the black current...

How I rejoiced that I'd been born in the east, where people could be happy. Nobody could be happy on this other shore. They must be mad to give themselves up to such misery, when they could have used the river as the highroad to prosperity, variety, civilized lives. As I thought this, something deep inside me and far below the surface seemed to agree and flood me with a wry euphoria.

"Soup's ready," Jothan announced.

We walked for the best part of another day till we reached a rough road running north and south. The trail stopped short of this road, leaving a mask of undergrowth. We must have veered quite a way inland, far from the river.

Andri jerked his thumb southerly. "Worlzend's thataway. We head north. We'll come to Pleasegod in a couple of hours. You'll stay out of sight with Jothan, till I find you decent raiment. If we meet someone beforehand—"

"I know. I'll dive into the nearest bush."

"That might look furtive. Just keep your trap shut. Glance demurely at the ground."

We did soon pass a curious contrivance: a cart loaded with packages, drawn by two huge hairy hounds, the like of which I'd never seen before. A skinny man trotted behind, clad in doublet and breeches, cocked hat and wooden clogs, flicking the air with a whip. He paid us scant heed, beyond a nod and a raking glance across me. Averting his gaze from my companions' machetes, he stepped up his pace and lashed the hounds.

"He didn't seem any too curious," I said when the skinny man had passed.

Jothan grunted. "He couldn't be fool enough to fancy we'd rob him on the highroad. I've no wish for a gibbet."

"What's that?"

"Gallows, girl, gallows! Hung up high to rot. God's Peace guards the high road. Sons of Adam hunt you down if you trangress it."

"The way they hunt witches down? How many women *do* disobey?"

"Not many. A few. Those as get seduced to the river, as if it sings 'em a song. Enough for entertainment once or twice a year, most places."

"You call the burning of women *entertainment?*"

"I don't, 'specially. Mobs do. We're all bloody ignorant savages compared with you, clever cocky superior Yaleen. 'Cept on certain matters such as Andri mentioned. Such as why we're here at all; and how."

An hour later we approached a laden barrow, pushed by a stout, black-cloaked woman. Her man strolled along with a single parcel tucked under his jerkined arm. Presumably, the parcel had bounced off the barrow and couldn't be fitted back on. The woman eyed me venomously, no doubt on account of my male attire.

"Ho," said the man, halting. He wore a bronze medal round his neck, with a circle and arrow design. In his belt was tucked a hollow tube of metal with a handle, which I assumed must be some sort of cudgel. "God's Peace, save you from Satan!"

"Save you," replied Andri with a smile.

"Who's she? Brotherhood business?"

"No, no. No problem, Brother." Andri made to move on.

"Wait a bit. I asked who."

"Oh, we're prospectors, Brother. We took her with us to cook, carry, and comfort. Piranha-mice got her clothes. Had to lend her some." Andri had already told me that's what they called those ravenous little beasts.

"Piranha-mice? Close by?" The man looked dubious.

"Close enough. Better push on. Getting dark soon, isn't it?"

"I'm safe enough."

"Not from mice."

"They sleep." The man scrutinized me. Remembering advice, I glanced briefly at the ground. "What kind of cook is a skinny wretch without an ounce of fat? What comfort's she?"

Andri grinned wickedly. "Thieving cook. Had to teach her a lesson."

"Thieving cooks wax plump."

"Not if they're fasted."

"Doesn't figure. You cook the meals yourself, keep her tethered?"

"Oh, he's a born joker, this one." Jothan nudged Andri aside. Suddenly he looked alarmed, and cocked an ear. "Hark. ... Thought I heard a rustling."

"Mice, this far north?"

"First time for everything, Brother!" Jothan shoved me. "Get along, hussy, while there's still flesh on those bones. Godspeed," he called over his shoulder. And on we walked; though the man stood watching us till we rounded the next corner.

"Busybody," muttered Andri, once we were out of sight. "At least there ain't nothing like your mirror and lantern signals over here. Though one thing the Sons do have is pistols."

I repeated, "Pistols?"

He stuck a finger in his belt — where the man had stowed his tube — pulled it out, and said, "Bang. Kill you at a hundred paces. Hopefully. Cost a bit, take weeks to craft."

"Oh."

"I'd trust myself to throw a knife first. Pompous things, pistols. As soon explode your hand as kill your enemy. In my opinion." His eyes narrowed. "Don't know about pistols, hmm? Mentioned none in your account of the east."

"You never asked," said I quickly. "Can't mention everything."

He caught and shook me. "Don't tell any lies, Yaleen! Lies catch you out!"

Soon, at dusk, we arrived on the outskirts of Pleasegod. I stayed in hiding with Jothan while Andri sallied into the town, returning after half an hour with a bundle for me: a ghastly ankle-length frock, with cowl, wrapped around a pair of rope sandals. It was pretty dark by now, but I could still tell how hideous the costume was. Surrendering my own well-made, serviceable boots and breeches from behind a bush, I watched them disappear into Andri's backpack. I think that's where he put them. I never saw them again.

Being now in disguise as a penitent, slavish female, I attracted no attention in Pleasegod, where we spent that night at the Gladfare Inn. The size of this institution puzzled me at first, till I realized that over here men must be on the hoof constantly. Our own eastern inns were simply places where you caroused. Most eastern travelers had their own floating homes along with them. Those women and girls who hadn't, rented private rooms chosen from the town register.

The Gladfare Inn was boisterous with boozers, in its long hall and out in its colonnaded courtyard. Above the hall rose two stories of shabby bedchambers equipped with straw mattresses on trestles, ewers of water, soap like chunks of yellow rock. That evening I stayed in my room with the door barred, occasionally peeping down at the lantern-lit courtyard where Andri and Jothan had repaired to amuse themselves. Down below was a jollity in which I could not join. Apparently, a "certain type" of woman drank in taverns. Subsequently, I heard thumping and crashing on the stairways and corridors, shrieks, and giggles.

In the morning Jothan confessed that there was a more salubrious inn located behind the Donjon, where respectable men with respectable wives would stay. But we weren't seeking the company of pillars of society, were we?

Pleasegod in the morning was a sprawling, tatty, smelly place, with rubbish lying around in the streets, disconcerting nobody but me. Yet from early on it was bustling with barrows, porters, carts, costermongers — all the more bustling, I suppose, because of the low level of technical aids. In other circumstances I might have accounted the enormous marketplace as picturesque, but for me it was overshadowed by two of the buildings flanking it: the great brick prayerhall, and yes, the stern stone Brotherhood

Donjon, before which lay a patch of ashes where no one trod.

The heart had quite gone out of traveling, for me. I, who had wanted to see the whole world! Never would I desire to add Pleasegod to the roll call of other towns I'd visited — blessed names like Aladalia and Ajelobo. Even dirty Guineamoy and neglected Port Barbra seemed paradises by comparison.

I felt the same about the succeeding towns along our route: Dominy and Adamopolis, each of them spaced apart by half a dozen intervening hovel villages. Life went on there, true; but it wasn't my idea of living.

North of Pleasegod we met an increasing volume of traffic on the highroad; and travelers tended to gang up in bands of six to ten folk to while away the trudge convivially with songs and tales. But company was the last thing we wanted. We shrugged off invitations to join a party and attempts to tag along with us.

It had been ages since I had caught sight of the river even distantly. Once we left Adamopolis behind, though, the highroad climbed up through hills verging on mountains. The jungle dwindled; and I thought I knew where we were now, for when I'd been sailing north of Spanglestream I had spied peaks inland to the west.

The highest point of our climb afforded a grand view east across leagues of land.

How could anyone enjoy the view? A grisly monument marked it. Boulders were piled together. From their midst rose a pole that supported a rusty cage in the shape of a human body: an iron suit, with a padlock fastening it. Within, a skeleton. This death cage creaked and grated in the wind. But had the condemned person been dead before his body was locked in — or not? I didn't ask. A group of travelers had stopped to mumble and make signs, and glance furtively at the vast perspective....

Far away, sunlight glinted from a long strip of water, thin and insignificant at such a distance. Even further to the northeast I noted a vague gray fuzz, like a blur in my eye. Could it be the smoke of Guineamoy?

"So here's Lookout Gibbet," Andri muttered sourly. "Don't stare at the river, Yaleen."

We hastened by.

Soon we were descending, somewhat riverwards, into forested terrain where I could see our destination nestling in the foothills.

Manhome South was a substantial town, lying in the cup of a valley, fronting a thin crescent-shaped lake. From above, it almost looked civilized. Broad streets of two- and three-story timber houses were set out in a grid pattern. These residences petered out into a mass of humbler dwellings built with mud bricks and roofed with reeds — though the grid persisted throughout. By the lakeside rose several large

edifices of stone and proper brick.

Jothan pointed. "There's the Tithe Exchequer ... that's the Brotherhood Donjon, and the Theodral nearby..."

"Theodral?"

"The Deotheorist H.Q. And over there's the Academy of Techniques."

Quite a center of administration and learning! On such matters as how to build death cages, or how to bore metal tubes that could kill people from afar....

Once down in the outskirts of Manhome South, we loitered in a scrofulous public park till nightfall. Then we made our way through the blacked-out streets — lit only by whatever glow escaped from houses, plus starlight — till we arrived at a three-story dwelling surrounded by bushes and a fence.

Jothan and I stayed outside while Andri slipped in through the gate. He was immediately greeted by the savage raving of a hound — which he must have known well, since it shut up quickly. Presently he reappeared, to conduct us round in the darkness to the back stoop where a door stood ajar, spilling dirty amber light. We entered a kitchen. A tall, freckled-faced man awaited us, dressed in a loose gray linen robe. Bunches of gingery hair like rusty wire sprouted from the sides and back of an otherwise balding, spotted cranium. On his upper lip, an incongruously neat little ginger brush of a moustache. Standing there with his big hairy knuckles loosely clenched, he looked as tough as a plank. But he wore spectacles, too, glassy windows behind which his watery eyes were thoughtful.

"Upstairs," he ordered. "Bolt the door, Andri." Picking up an oil lamp, he preceded us.

And so I first made the acquaintance of Dr. Edrick.

I was to spend three weeks in his house, being questioned afternoon and evening while Dr. Edrick made notes in spidery handwriting in a big black ledger. At first Andri assisted in the interrogation; and where he had established general outlines, now Edrick filled in the minutest particulars.

I must have spilled out the whole of my life, and of all our eastern lives. And why not? Why should I have held back? Was I betraying our way of life, our river-way? Hardly! I felt more like an ambassador of sanity, showing these Westerners how life could be conducted more satisfactorily than they obviously conducted it. Was I in any way their enemy? How could I be, when these two had helped and sheltered me? Had there been no Andri and Edrick, doubtless I would have spilled out all the same details under less comfortable circumstances, with a bonfire awaiting what was left of me at the end of it.

Besides, Edrick in particular had a nose for any pussyfooting on my part.

So I told; and told. Trying to put to the back of my mind the fact that I was

trading my treasure of information, all for a hope and a song.

It transpired that Edrick was a Doctor of Deotheory: an influential man. He must be leading a double life, it seemed to me, if he was also mucking about with the river and was willing to protect me. Each Firstday that I was there he dressed in white robes, to proclaim in the prayerhouse by the Theodral. Though when I begged to go there, out of curiosity, he flatly refused; I knew none of the responses. Every weekday morning, wearing a less formal version of these same robes, he departed for the Theodral itself. While he was out of the house I browsed through a number of treatises from his small library. That was when I finished cleaning the house, scrubbing clothes and platters, cooking, and feeding the hound....

For those were my duties. Dr. Edrick had a "housekeeper" apparently devoted to him and thoroughly loyal. He had sent her away on the morning after my arrival to visit her family in Adamopolis, something she had been hinting at for many months. I was to be her temporary replacement. My presence was more explicable this way.

All in all, this was rather like being aboard the *Spry Goose* again — as an impoverished passenger, who had been set to work cleaning the bilges for my keep!

Edrick's library: it was small mainly because paper was scarce — a fact I had noticed in the night-soil shack out back, where a bundle of rags were spitted on a nail. What books there were, were crudely printed in very small editions — each with the permit of the worthy Brotherhood stamped in them. Maybe that was why paper was scarce, too. The censors restricted the supply.

From Edrick's books I didn't learn much beyond what Andri had already told me on the journey. Or rather, I learned *more*, but I wasn't much more enlightened by all the casuistical hypotheses and dogmas about the motives of the God-Mind, or the nature of the Snake, a topic with which I felt better acquainted than any Westerner could possibly be. Nor did I gain an inkling of what Dr. Edrick's private river project was about.

He came back home one day to find me — with some cleaning chore suspended midway — perusing a yellowing old tract titled *The Truesoil of Manhood.* Taking this from me, he tossed it carelessly on a table.

"You'll wear your eyes out, girl."

I was about to mention that his own peepers could well benefit by replacing those crude spectacles of his with some decent lenses ground in Verrino; however, he frowned as if anticipating some such impertinence. Though actually other matters were on his mind.

"Things are boiling up," he said. "Few know it yet, but it's so. That fine brother of yours set the cat among the chicks a year ago."

"Did he? He was more like a chick

among the cats."

"I know, and I'm sorry. That was the decision of the local Sons in Minestead. Understandably."

"Did I hear you—?"

"My dear girl, those folk have to live close to the river, on account of the ore deposits. So they're specially sensitive to river-witchery. When the Theodral at Manhome North heard about the incident, they would far rather have talked to Mr. Capsi in a lot more detail."

"Maybe Capsi was lucky they didn't get the chance!"

"At least they had his gear to study, at the Academy. The underwater garment wasn't destroyed. Of course, there's still the problem of men being able to use the river only once...."

So that was where Capsi's diving suit had ended up!

"Manhome North: where's that?"

He looked amused. "A month's walk and more. It's the other great center. Anyway, since the Capsi episode there have been two schools of thought....

"I'll rephrase that: two schools have existed for a while. Now events are honing the intellectual conflict between the Conservers and Crusaders. The latter being in the minority as yet."

"These Conservers want to keep things as they are?"

"They intend to keep our Truesoil secure and pure."

"Whereas Crusaders want to make contact with the east?"

"Contact?" He smiled grimly. "In a matter of speakng."

"And where do *you* stand, Doctor?"

"What a busybody you are, girl! Still, your family appears to have a history of poking your noses in..." He hestitated. "I view myself as a sort of mediator between the two schools. The Crusaders, should they prevail, have it in them to provide us with much more exact knowledge of our enemy, the Satan-current and its minions. All the better to safeguard our human way of life — not by crude fire and torment but by refined skills, by techniques."

"Hence your secret river project down south?"

"My project? Not so! A project on behalf of the Crusaders! One from which I had high hopes of squeezing juicy knowledge...."

"To feed back to the Conservers!" I was guessing, but this seemed likely.

"You make me sound ... cynical. I would rather describe myself as a pragmatic idealist." He debated with himself. "That project was only in its first stages. Maybe now it's stillborn."

"Because I turned up?"

"And maybe it needs only twisting askew of its original aim. One item of great interest stands out from your narrative, Yaleen." Dr. Edrick adjusted his spectacles. "To wit, the existence of a certain fungus drug in the southern jungles."

"Oh, no," said I.

"Ah, yes," said he. "What a shame you never saw the plant itself!"

"It may not grow on this side of the river."

"You already told that you survived our southern jungles because of your knowledge of similar jungles on the other bank. Therefore, by and large the vegetation corresponds. Most likely that fungus grows in our jungles, too — farther south than explorers have ventured recently. Though you have."

"I'm not going back there!"

"Could it be that you're going to Minestead? Opposite Verrino?" Edrick chuckled. "There to stand on the shore and wave a kerchief? In Minestead, where they burn people so impulsively."

"You could tramp around those jungles for ages collecting hoardes of different fungi, and none of them the right one!"

"That, Yaleen, rather depends on the effort put into an expedition. The investment, the number of personnel. We'll need rabbits to screen out what's poisonous; and human volunteers to test what isn't."

"I'm not volunteering."

"Goes without saying. You're too valuable as a source of different information. Oh, we'll need lots of other women to cater for such a party, who can act as volunteers."

So you see women as a superior form of rabbit?"

He wagged his finger astutely. "Point one: you've said that the drug is used in erotic orgies. Presumably involving men and women. Though not provenly so. I can imagine many perversions of natural behavior on your east bank.

"Point two: it's the *women* of Port Barbra who orchestrate these lecherous rites; and the only time you saw the drug in action was in the case of a woman, your boatmistress.

"Point three: the female brain must have different gland-juice in it than a man's. Hence woman's vulnerability to the Snake. The effect of the drug on women may be more noticeable than the effect on men. That's all." He looked pleased at his lucid grasp of the situation.

I could feel only an abject horror. I'd thought I had reached a sort of sanctuary. I'd imagined that somehow this might lead me back to my homeland. I'd fancied that I understood Dr. Edrick — the mediator who stood between me and the cruel Brotherhood.

I hadn't understood a thing. Instead, I was simply a traitor.

"Black current," I whispered silently within me, "*help me.* Help us all." I prayed in the prayerhouse of my skull as a witch might pray to the Satan-snake.

No response. Alas.

Dr. Edrick fiddled pedantically with his glasses. "One adjusts to new circumstances, Yaleen. One adjusts. Have I not adjusted to your arrival

here from the land of Satan? I trust I've conveyed *my* position well enough to help you adjust your own — to what must be."

One thing was obvious. I would have to escape from Edrick's house. I would have to get away from Manhome South. To flee, alone, to somewhere else. Probably with Sons and Crusaders hunting for me.

Where could I go?

I believe the black current may have heard my plea for help, across all those leagues of male land....

That night I dreamed. I dreamed I was at Spanglestream with Jambi. We were standing together on the esplanade. Her husband was loitering some way off. Fishing smacks rode on the water, their emblazoned eyes lit by the shimmer of phosphorescence. Streamers snaked across the river like slow lightning flashes — silver arrows pointing the way from west to east. Pointing toward Spanglestream.

And Jambi said to me, in an offhand way, "Whatever the little beauties are, they seem to keep stingers away."

I woke up with a start. Her words echoed in me. I repeated them aloud, over and over.

Had she really said that when we were on the waterfront together? Had I forgotten, or not noticed at the time, because I'd been tipsy? Had I not heard consciously — yet some part of my mind heard and recorded what she uttered?

I rose and paced the room in the darkness, thinking hard.

Was this wishful thinking? Dream fantasy? Or was it a sign? A response from the black current? *Which?* Why didn't *The Book of the River* mention that the waters of Spanglestream were free of stingers? If it was true.

Maybe the fisherwomen of Spanglestream — Jambi's old school chums — knew this but didn't make a big deal out of it, except that they felt less leery of sorting their nets by hand without using gauntlets....

Maybe the waters *as such* weren't free of stingers? Maybe it was only the streamers that were safe? These streamers waxed and waned; so the water would indeed be infested sometimes. But not on the most splendid occasions. When the streamers seemed to stretch clear across the river in great swaths, interrupted only by the midway current, would there be a clear path all the way?

If I were to dive into such a silver swath from *this* shore, and swim with it until I reached the current....

Ah, the current. Problem.

It had let me pass once. Why not twice?

Thence onward to the east bank, safe in another luminous swath....

A long swim, even so!

Yet, if I wasn't threatened with being stung to death, I could take my time. Vary the strokes. Even float

awhile to recoup my strength.

I tried to taste and savor my dream again. It had been so vivid, so lucid. But was it *true?*

Maybe Jambi herself hadn't spoken that sentence. Maybe I'd overheard one of her fishfolk friends say it at the party. And maybe the current itself had spoken to me, through Jambi's dream-lips.

Maybe. Maybe. I could go round like this in circles forever. I decided to treat the dream as true.

I considered. Guineamoy must lie roughly northeast of Manhome South, if that tiny pall of smoke-polluted air I'd spotted from the heights of Lookout Gibbet had indeed been our grimy factory town. So Spanglestream lay to the southeast.

How many leagues away from Manhome South was it? Ten? Twelve? Perhaps no more. I could assume with some confidence that the Sons must shun *that* part of the shore even more fiercely: there where those bright emanations from the Snake coursed across to touch the very bank. All the country opposite Spanglestream ought to be deserted for a long way inland. Once again my dream pointed in the right direction.

I made a mental note to avoid asking Edrick's opinion of the streamers, or show any special interest should he raise the subject. Then I climbed back into bed.

The next morning I began to steal food and store it in my room. Discreetly but busily.

As it turned out, it was lucky that I'd had to feed Edrick's hound. By now the beast thought of me as a friend. Or as something familiar, at any rate.

Otherwise, when I slipped out at midnight a few days later, the wretched creature would have barked everyone awake, in between tearing me to shreds....

In the interim Dr. Edrick had said no more to me about his grand new project. But he had been absent longer than usual each day. On returning he had twice closeted himself in his study for ages with Andri and Jothan. Jothan departed the house a few hours after the second occasion, equipped for the highroad. I had no idea whether he was heading back down south — or northward, as a courier to the Ka-Theodral in Manhome North. (Ka-Theodral was the formal name for the building — *Ka* being some old word for the essence of a person, which rode the psylink back to Eeden when he died.) Whichever direction Gingerbush had taken, he was well out of the way. That same night I crept downstairs and unbolted the kitchen door.

I tossed meat to the dog, which appeared as if by magic. Before I had gone half a dozen steps it had bolted all the raw chunks down, and bounded after me. All the way to the gate, I had to soothe it and thump it in the manner that dogs seem to find friendly. When I shut the gate on it, pushing it back, the

hound began to whine noisily. I tore a stick off a bush and hurled it far into the dark garden. Away I sprinted on tiptoes, hoping that when the animal came back, slavering on the piece of wood and thrashing its tail, and found me not, amnesia would overtake it.

It must have forgotten. No barking rent the night.

Onward through Manhome South I slipped. I'd gathered that a woman out alone at night could be only a "whore" or a witch. But I was conveniently dressed in the color of darkness, and there was nothing in the way of civic illuminations.

Three hours later, with the town well behind me, I was toiling up a forest trail leading out of the valley.

Getting across town and out through the shanties hadn't been too difficult. The grid layout proved invaluable. Even the fouler, rougher areas were arranged north by south and east by west.

I had to hide only once; and run another time, when I set a dog a-raving — but it must have been chained. I hope it choked. I tripped and filthied myself only twice, out in the vegetation fields beyond the shanties.

On the far side of the fields was tangle. Finding a trail through all the bushes and trees took a long time. I had to backtrack. I had to circle to the north. Eventually, I found a rutted road heading in the right direction — that direction being eastward, riverward.

Just as the sky was starting to gray with imminent light, the road reached its destination: a timber camp. Ahead were long huts, felled trees, carts — with yokes and very long traces laid out for teams of men to haul. (Or teams of huge hounds. Or women.)

I debated my chance of racing through the camp. But it was too near dawn to run the risk of being spotted by early risers. And there might be dogs about. Instead, I worked my way all around the slope, which had been thinned by felling. By the time the sun did rise, I was beyond.

And a clanging alarm sounded from the camp. My heart stopped for a moment — till I realized that this was just the signal to rise and shine; and toil.

I journeyed on for perhaps half a league more till I finally had to stop, exhausted. The undergrowth was thick but not impenetrable. No paths were evident other than minor runs trodden by small creatures unknown. I burrowed into a dense brake, squirmed round several times like a dog to make my bed, and slept.

When I woke in the afternoon, insects were zizzing about me, settling on my scratches and my sweat to feed. I fairly itched with their attentions, but I didn't immediately slap these pests away. Holding quite still, I listened: for any distant shouts, the baying of hounds, whatever. Nothing. I heard only the noises of the forest: a babbling murmur, occasional cackles. So I fed,

then I emptied my bowels, burying the evidence with the aid of a stone. I forged onward. Downhill, now. Away from the heights that lay inland. I navigated by the brightness of the sun.

It took eight days to reach the waters of Spanglestream. I didn't hurry unduly — often I *couldn't*. I avoided easy, exposed routes, though after the first day or so I didn't expect to be overtaken by pursuing Sons. Dr. Edrick must surely have decided that I had struck off north in the direction of Verrino. Or perhaps, less likely, that I might have fled due east straight toward the enchanted river to have my witch's limbs in it as soon as possible.

Instead, I slipped southeast diagonally across the land.

This was no mean journey. Yet, with ample food on hand, and compared with those weeks of travel down in the deep south, at times it seemed almost a stroll.

At last one evening as the world was darkening, I pushed through bush and creepers for the last time, to stand upon the riverbank once more. I beheld silver streamers snaking upon the waters, and my heart rejoiced. As night fell, the phosphorescence glowed ever more brightly.

Dream and reality seemed to merge. Once again the myriads of beasties were putting on a show for me, and this was such a show as seemed more allied to my dream than to my memory. As far as I could see in both directions liquid silver floated, hardly broken at all by straits of black water. Even if I drifted downstream, I should still be safe.

One tongue of white fire lay particularly close to the shore. It was as wide as could be: three hundred spans, or four. It angled down from the southeast. Faint twinklings of light visible far off in the northeast were perhaps the harbor lanterns of Spanglestream itself.

I slipped off my women's black weeds — they were certainly worse for wear. I discarded my undershorts. I kicked off my frayed rope sandals. I cleansed myself of the west. I was determined to plunge into the stream quite nude. If any Son of Adam could have seen me, he would have known that a witch was going home, and would have covered his eyes. Or else he would have stared, and lusted for fire.

I plodded out to where the mud fell sharply away — and launched myself upon the luminous highway.

Even when a light wind stirs the gentlest waves, on so wide a river after a while you lose sight of the bank entirely. Stars spread above me in a second river: mainly of silver, with several sapphires and rubies scattered through that setting. I took the constellation of the Axe for my guide, remembering how it would turn about the Pole as time went by.

No stingers attacked. If great shoals of pollfish, ajil, and hoke were grazing upon the streamer, I felt no mouths bump or nibble at me. My arms were haloed in a warm white fire. My head, too, I suppose — though I never dunked my face as I swam.

I don't know how many times I varied my stroke — breast, butterfly, crawl — or whether an hour had gone by or longer, when blackness loomed immediately ahead. The ever-splashing silver had begun to blind me to the stars of the Axe; that blackness gave me back my sight.

I didn't tread water or hesitate.

But I did think fiercely in my head: "Worm of the World, it's me: Yaleen! Let me pass!"

If I'd expected it to drink me deep, then spew me out again with a giant fish beneath to bear me senseless to the eastern shore, I was wrong.

I swam through the current sluggishly, breasting what felt like soft butter or congealing lard. And while I swam, it explored me. Dreams strolled around inside my skull, examining the contents once again, laying out the wares. I never sank into the depths — of the current or of unconsciousness. In the midst of my "hallucinations" I remained aware of where I was. Thus, I was swimming briefly through the southern jungles — then along the highroad in the company of Andri and Jothan. Next I was floating in Dr. Edrick's house. Here the current seemed to shudder, to wobble....

As before, it drained me. It didn't speak, though. Maybe it was too busy with what it was learning from me of the western land to spare time for my immediate problems. For little me, lost in the middle of the river. Maybe it had already communicated enough by sending me that dream. Perhaps I had to be truly unconscious, before it could connect on the personal level.

Or did it communicate? Not in words as such?

Somehow I sensed that it was satisfied with me. Somehow I suspected that I might be able to pass through it in the future whenever I wished, or needed to. This was nothing vouchsafed to me directly; no more than intuition.

Certainly this second passage was far smoother than my first brain-crunching, suffocating, inadvertent one.

Then I was through.

And flailing about in ordinary river water. Phosphorescence dazzled me once more. The invisible shore lay another three-quarters of a league away. I was as far from land as could be. And quite wrung out.

I felt dreadfully, absurdly let down and abandoned. All of a sudden my relief at passing through was replaced by rage. In retrospect I think this was a necessary rage — like my screwed-up emotions on the jungle trek weeks earlier — which gave me the strength to carry on.

"Help me, damn you!" I cried. The current ignored my appeal. I was of no further interest.

"You heap of shit!" I howled.

Then I gathered myself, and struck out again along the quicksilver road, not so quick for me.

Eventually — on the hundredth or thousandth occasion when I craned my neck — I saw lanterns distinctly, tiny pools of light, irregular dark humps of buildings lightly rimmed by starlight.

Suddenly: masts spoking the stars, a fishing smack lolling on my left by a moored buoy, another on my right.

Quite unexpectedly, I was there.

I stroked along that last lapping shining tongue. I sidled along the base of the wharf. I touched a stone step. I hauled myself out.

Dripping silver, I crawled painfully up the flight. I weighed a ton. Each separate step was unbelievably solid and unmoving.

At the top I slid forward and spread out like a jelly with no bones in it. But before I passed out I decided maybe I was wrong about the imperviousness of stone. Spanglestream quayside suddenly felt more comforting, more tenderly cradling, than any other place where I had laid my head to rest for a very long while.

I'm hazy about the exact sequence of events thereafter — I was discovered presently, still lying there — however, the night certainly ended with me wrapped in a blanket on a spare bunk aboard a brig, the *Cornucopia*.

Next day was confession day.

After I'd been lent new togs, and had devoured a huge plateful of good fried river fish, I confessed to the boatmistress of the *Cornucopia*. That afternoon I repeated my story to an emergency mini-meeting of the riverguild — consisting of the quaymistress and two guildmistresses who happened to be in port. One of these had been present at the conclave held on board the *Santamaria* at Tambimatu, prior to my New Year's Eve departure. She was able to vouch that I was the person I said I was.

To these three women I told my whole story, Verrino included. And how I informed Dr. Edrick about the fungus drug. And how men of the west believed that all of us on this world were made of artificial flesh; and when people died, their minds returned to Eeden — home of the God-Mind that originally sent us forth to populate strange planets, and multiply. All of it, all.

Many were the urgent coded signals flashed up- and downstream during the next few days; you can be sure of it!

And me?

I was quartered at the quaymistress's own home in town till a full guild meeting could be convened. She, Halasso, wavered between regarding

me as a miracle, and miscreant. Or perhaps someone who had contracted a lethal disease and survived it uniquely, to carry its seeds around henceforth in my veins. I was both a prodigy — a bit of a pariah. Heroine, and renegade.

The mini-conclave had sworn me to keep mum about the bulk of my tale. (Though what exactly my oaths were worth when the black current itself had twice allowed me passage was another matter....) The bulk of it; but not all. That was impossible. Word had spread around the *Cornucopia;* and had leaked ashore, as well as to other boats. Nor did Halasso try to keep me penned in her house. If she had tried, she wouldn't have succeeded. Halasso's home wasn't — *couldn't* be — another Edrick's. After my months of exile, I had to rub shoulders with real life again: streets, taverns, cafés, waterfront. I was on a leash, but not too short a one.

As I wandered about, I attracted a certain amount of attention. To those in the know, I was a bit of a wonder, to point the finger at. Look: there's the first riverwoman ever to cross the current — and cross it twice! She's the first of us who knows all about the west! Does she not have horns on her head now, or a jet black tongue, or some other mark of strangeness? Maybe she can read the current's mind and foretell the future! That sort of thing. Some women would try to pump me for information, either backslappingly or unctuously.

I enjoyed this for a while; then it began to oppress me. Presently — and none too soon — life settled down again. People stopped staring and asking silly questions — or not-so-silly questions, which I dared not answer. Six weeks after I'd swum ashore, a full conclave of eight guildmistresses was held aboard a schooner out of Gate of the South; and I confessed in full all over again.

This conclave spanned four full days. The guildmistresses were not so much sitting in judgment, but more as a tribunal of inquiry: to delve into all available facts about the other half of our world, facts that might cast a new light on what we thought of as the certainties of our existence.

They always conducted their deliberations with me present, and free to contribute. I was never, until near the very end, sent out of the elegant cabin with its silver wall sconces, gildenwood furniture, and its tapestry — of the Obelisk at Port Firsthome. Still, I fancied there was a certain whiff of trial about the proceedings.

On the last day the youngest 'mistress present — a handsome blonde woman of Sarjoy named Tamath — raised the matter of that Obelisk.

The monument rose from a rocky butte overlooking the town. A popular picnic spot, that, commanding a fine view down meadows toward Port Firsthome and the river. Whoever had woven the tapestry had included sev-

eral family parties. Scarlet and orange rugs were spread, to contrast with the rumpling background grass that rose (in the tapestry at least) to meet the gray conical roofs of Sarjoy, and the blue of river and sky — the heavens wearing a few fluffy clouds for contrast. Some naked children skipped in the foreground, a young couple kissed, and an old man capered curiously, brandishing a flask of wine. The seated mothers and fathers were mostly squat, as though their threads had sagged or the weaver couldn't manage figures at rest. An open hamper spilled fruit and fishes and strings of sausages onto one rug. It looked as though the antic patriach had kicked over the hamper, in pique at their having forgotten to cook most of the food.

The Obelisk of the Ship was a basalt shaft of a hundred spans high, shaped like a sleek fish with tail fins to support it. Really, it ought to have dwarfed the picnickers more than it did. An attempt at perspective had been made — unsuccessfully. The column was leaning, about to topple and crush the people below.

I suppose the tapestry was charming.

Inscribed on one of the black base fins in tiny letters was simple legend:

HERE PEOPLE FIRST CAME
INTO THIS WORLD

Into it they came, with rugs and a hamper, arses like barrels, no clothes on the kids, and a drunken grandad. ... That was, I recalled from my own visit, the actual inscription carved in time-worn letters on the obelisk. Verbatim.

Tamath rose, crossed to the tapestry, touched the legend.

"Isn't that an odd way of phrasing it?" she asked. "Not 'landed upon' or 'arrived at' — but 'came into.' Almost as though people first *came into* existence on that spot...." She eyed Nelliam, a senior guildmistress of Gangee, an ancient wrinkled woman with the face of a prune. Tamath eyed her hopefully. "Doesn't our guild agree?"

"Language changes with time," suggested Nelliam. "The sense of words."

Tamath pressed on. "How do we really imagine we got here? Were thousands of human beings crammed into a ship of space? What would they eat? Consider, too, what Yaleen has said: a foreign world may not be immediately hospitable."

I looked attentively at Tamath, careful not to grin in gratitude or stupid pride that she valued my report.

"To be sure, it must have air and water and life on it already, or else it's no use whatever. But why should the life be life that people can live with? Why should the air be air they can breathe? Why should the plants and fish be edible at all?"

The more I looked, though, the more I began to suspect that Tamath was, well, speaking out of fright. As people will babble pointlessly when they don't know the answer; yet,

they're compelled to speak for the sake of it, to keep up their presence. That sort of fright.

She had raised the matter because she had to raise something — vigorously. The tapestry was on hand to suggest the very thing, as well as to provide the pretext for her to parade across the cabin, elegantly.

She was only repeating what I had said. She continued repeating it forcefully, as though it were her own idea.

Nelliam shrugged. "Life's life. Air's air."

"Is it? Are they? Maybe we did have to be 'made' — or 'remade' — for this world of ours?" And now Tamath had to conjure something new out of the hat. I could almost see her reaching, straining herself. "If so, then the only place to make us was *right here.*"

Oh, well. I supposed some people had to psych themselves up to excel.

Sharla, a senior guildmistress, spoke up. She was of late middle age, and if any ultimate secrets were in possession of the guild, surely she should know them. Obviously, she didn't; obviously, there weren't any....

"You know," drawled Sharla, "that obelisk has always puzzled me on another score. It's a symbol of a ship of space, right? So where's the hulk of the ship itself? Something tough enough to travel between the stars ought to last for lifetimes after it lands — even with rain and rust attacking. Yet, there's nothing at all."

Tamath crossed quietly back and resumed her seat. During the next several minutes while Sharla expounded, Tamath nodded sagely, to convince everyone (except perhaps Nelliam) that she had made a valuable contribution by midwifing a truly original idea....

"I wonder about the nature of this ship," mused Sharla. "Need it have been built of metal or anything similar? Imagine for a moment that we could harness a giant fish. Suppose we built a deckhouse on its back and planted masts and dug holes in its body. Imagine that boats were like that — not of wood, with a bit of metal.

"Could this ship of space somehow have been built from living tissues? Could it have manufactured our bodies out of itself, and so consumed itself?"

"You have an overactive imagination," remarked Nelliam.

"Yet the black current is a great living being — of a nature we can't understand. Subtle and immense! Why not the ship? Imagine that a ship could be a living being, which carried *no* crew or passengers — because it was *its own* crew and passengers. Something godlike, beyond our comprehension." Sharla had whipped up her own enthusiasm now; her voice was awed, tinged with sincerity.

"Yet it was manufactured by people?"

"Maybe people made something even greater than themselves — which then produced something even greater: something alive, superbly wise; and it was *this* that built the ship. Or gave

birth to it, even. The people who started the process wouldn't be equal to the end result."

"And how could this be, Sharla?"

"A baby grows into a girl — who grows into a woman. The woman is entirely changed from the baby she once was."

Nelliam sniffed. "Whereupon the woman gives birth to another baby. Back we are where we began."

"It's just a comparison."

"Perhaps it's a good one," said Tamath. "Or perhaps: like a leaf-worm changing into a flutterby?"

"*I* vote we should concentrate on what is sure," Nelliam said. "Such as the likely capers of the observer-men at Verrino, when Yaleen decides to favor them with an account of her recent travels."

"I wouldn't!" I protested. "Honestly! Why should I? My brother isn't there any longer."

"No, but your lover is. And other acquaintances." Nelliam tutted impatiently. "That's beside the point. I think we should consider enlisting the support of those observers. If the Westerners are so sure that we're the Devil's daughters, maybe they'll try to build bigger pistols to shoot right across the river. Or they may try to take to the air. I suggest an approach in confidence to the observers, so that they'll report any unusual sightings across the water. I'll go further. We should build observation towers ourselves. Convert the present signal stations. Erect more, and taller. It'll help communications. I can name several blind spots where a message can get held up for hours if a boat isn't in the right position to relay. A year ago I'd have said no message could be that urgent...." She brooded.

"Yes, but what about the *women* in the west?" I wanted to know. "The vile lives they lead. The burnings."

"Nothing we can do, Yaleen. Not without wrecking our own world."

"But—"

"What would you suggest?"

"*We* could take to the air!"

"We don't wish to. For reasons I'm sure even you must appreciate."

"Besides," drawled Sharla, now on the "Conserving" side, "supposing we crossed the river on a wind, how could we be sure of getting back? If we did cross over, what then? Do we land, and make speeches about freedom and happiness? Till they put us on a bonfire...." Sharla, I realized, was one of those who would argue both sides of a case with enough flair to convince you that she was deeply committed ... to deciding nothing.

Nelliam tapped her fingers lightly on the table. "I see a more basic objection against intervening. Something Yaleen appears not to have realized, despite her experiences over there. A vital difference between us and them. One that the Sons should surely work out, given all that Yaleen fed them — if they aren't utterly pigheaded." She looked around the conclave. "Well?"

"The forms of social organization?" It was Marti, the dusky veteran quaymistress of Guineamoy, who answered. Judging by her tone and her raised eyebrows, she was telling us, not asking. An ally of Nelliam's, then....

"Exactly," said Nelliam.

"How do you mean?" I asked. "What did I miss?"

It was Marti who told me, briskly. "It's like this, Yaleen. Technically, those Sons are more primitive than we are. But they possess centralized authority: this 'secular arm,' the Brotherhood. That isn't in the least like our own guild system. Their two Manhomes, North and South, are obviously twin capitals, *ruling* towns. Here no town rules any other. Over there they have what might be called a 'government.' "

"Two, surely? If there are two ... capitals."

"They will need twin capitals because of the slower communications. That doesn't imply two separate countries. On the contrary — judging by the names."

"Oh."

"Our way of ordering society is invisible and unobtrusive. Theirs is visible and brutal. Harsh circumstances lead to harsh solutions. The circumstances of those Sons are tough because they've denied themselves the river—"

"Which itself orders affairs invisibly and unobtrusively?" I hazarded.

"*You* have more knowledge of that than we do, girl!"

Nelliam raised her hand, though rather limply. "Whatever mumbo jumbo's in the Chapbook, our guild isn't founded on mystic wisdom. We're rooted in tradition: *practical* tradition. That Brotherhood is dogmatic. It *is* rooted in mumbo jumbo — with practicalities playing second fiddle."

"The Chapbook is mumbo jumbo?" I echoed incedulously. Two or three of the other women, notably Tamath, looked quite shocked.

"Obviously, I'm exaggerating. I do so to make my point. We pay lipservice to what's in the Chapbook, because it *works.* If you're to ply the river for your livelihood, the river must accept you. We drink of the current. We obey certain codes. Then basically we forget about it. We don't grovel on our knees on deck every morning and pray to the river-spirit. We don't make a big deal of the black current, always and ever, remorselessly. But they do over there. They're obsessed — with denying it. The current is our background; that's where it belongs. It's *their* foreground, even though they cower away from it."

Silence in the cabin, for a while. If a Tamath had said such things, perhaps there would have been an uproar. But then, she wouldn't have.

"Talking practicalities," said I, "what about Dr. Edrick's scheme for poisoning the current?"

"May it fail," said Nelliam tightly. "May he thrash around for ten years,

never finding what he seeks. May he fall between those two stools, of Conserving and Crusading, and get squashed. Really, there's nothing we can do about it."

"We could tell everybody, from Umdala to Tambimatu. Put people on their guard. Tell them about the west."

"Why? So that everybody lives in a state of permanent anxiety? So that any malcontents have a lever against us?" Nelliam leaned toward me. "So that your fame spreads far and wide?" Yet, her tone was whimisical rather than malicious.

Shortly after, the conclave began to wind up. I was left with the odd sense of being high in the counsels of the land — yet, these counsels making little difference. The guild could trim our sails a bit; but could it ever actually alter course? On a long and rather straight river that leads forever from A to B, is there even any concept of altering course? Any need to?

After I was dismissed, the 'mistresses must indeed have come up with some last-minute practical conclusions: about the building of better signal stations that could double as spy towers (if equipped with observer-style telescopes). Some sort of consensus must have gelled, since I was to see the results before too long. Yet, basically I felt enormously let down. Once again. First by the current, now by the guild....

When I came to think of it more coolly, what actually could be done? On any scale corresponding to the size of the problem? Reacting prematurely might make it a problem. Once you identify something as a problem, it tends suddenly to get worse.

One of the last things said before I was dismissed came from Tamath:

"Mumbo jumbo or not" — and here she glanced at Nelliam — "may the black current show us our true course." Her look was respectful — but there was a slight edge of, shall we say ambition in her voice. She was a handsome, engaging woman, as I say. She must have worked hard, and pleased people. And all the while, perhaps, a little frightened of doing the wrong thing — while needing to speak out, proffer her opinion, make decisive choices. She would be admired for it, and she would never quite dare believe it herself.

"To be sure," conceded Nelliam. "Pardon my impietites. Blame them on the crotchets of an old lady. I was just trying to make a point."

"May the current show us our course...." Tamath had no idea how soon and how drastically the current would show us something! If what happened subsequently was indeed the current's own initiative....

Oh, yes. One other final thing was that I was assigned a berth and duties on board Tamath's own command, the *Blue Guitar*, now bound for southern waters.

And so I would continue my life as a riverwoman. Just as we would

all continue our lives.

For a while.

And so I did. And so did we all — for the next six months, till New Year's Day came round again, anniversary of my awakening washed up on a strange shore.

This particular new year found me on no strange shore. The *Blue Guitar* was tied up at the stone docks of Jangali....

On New Year's Eve I had walked out through the old town to visit Lalo and Kish, whom I hadn't seen for over a twelvemonth. The young couple ought to have moved out of the parental home into a place of their own, though it was to that treehouse that I went first, to inquire.

Lalo's mum turned out to be a portly, swarthy woman whose hair was a mass of wiry black wool and combs and strings of agate beads.

She directed me in the usual emphatic Jangali style, then added. "If you'll hang on a mo, I'll take you myself. I'm baby-sitting."

"Baby?" I suppose I gaped. "But how—?"

"Why, in the usual way, dear!" Her laugh boomed out. "How else?"

"I guess it's awhile since I saw them."

"Best to get your brood hatched early, I always say! Then all that bother won't wear you out in your prime. They'll have three babies, I think. The first one's a darling little boy, so the next should rightly be a big strapping girl."

I wondered whether Kish would ever learn to raise his voice as loud as hers....

"Has a woman called Jambi visited recently?" I asked on impulse.

"Who?"

So I described her, reminding Mum that Jambi was a friend of Kish's family and that we had both been on the boat that brought Kish and Lalo home.

"Oh, I remember! She did call once. Rootless, gadabout woman! Can't say as I took to her hugely. One shouldn't encourage that kind of thing. It's too unsettling, when a young man's trying to adjust to a new style of life."

Poor Kish....

"I expect you're right," I said.

"Of course I'm right. Now if you'll just wait a mo! There's ever so nice a view from that balcony."

"It really doesn't matter! I was only intending to pop in." I slapped my brow theatrically. "Oh, dear, now I've remembered something else I had to do!"

Mum scrutinized me. "Have you really? So what name should I mention to my Lalo?"

"None. Don't bother." I retreated. "Obviously, they're busy. Anyway, I'm quite a rootless gadabout myself!"

"What a peculiar whimsical way to behave! Well, *good-bye*," said Mum, and shut the door.

I left.

As I headed back toward the river, I thought of my own mother and father. I still hadn't been back to see them. Yet, that was hardly my fault! Tamath's boat had kept me to southern waters since my return — far from Verrino, so that I wouldn't overexcite the observers, I suppose. We were scheduled to sail downstream "sometime," but I could be fairly sure I wouldn't be permitted to hop boats to any old vessel I liked, for an earlier passage north. Tamath was keeping an eye on me.

I had written a couple of times to my parents — initially from Spanglestream — and had had two letters back. The second had been awaiting me at the quaymistress's poste restante when we docked at Jangali.

Mother's first letter had conveyed a certain air of reproach at my having absented myself for so long without sending word. (Naturally, I hadn't told her that I'd spent some of the time gadding footloose and fancy-free about the western world!)

I detected a degree of anxiety about Capsi, too. (*That* still required a personal explanation face to face. However, any adequate explanation was so intimately bound up with other events on which I shouldn't enlarge that the problem had got worse with time.)

All in all, both letters from Pecawar were quite complacent. A child had been born, of course. A girl. Her name was Narya. By now she was fifteen months old or so. Things were fine at home. Narya was a joy. Her first word had been "wain." It had rained in dusty Pecawar, impressing her.

Maybe my parents were weeping in private, but I doubted it. The keynote was complacency.

And Lalo's mum was militantly complacent.

And guildmistresses were fairly complacent, too. Because, in their guts, they couldn't imagine anything ever being very different. For them, the extent of foreignness was somewhere distant like Umdala.

Not, I hasten to add, that I thought there was any inherent virtue in striking up acquaintance with the really foreign, the west. Still, the west existed. And it was pulsing with people, whose souls were sick; some of whom at least were hatching plans that had to do with us.

Such thoughts occupied me while I walked back to the *Blue Guitar*. Then I put them from my mind.

That night a gang of us were planning to hit the Jingle-Jangle for a fine old thrash to celebrate New Year.

Whilst down at Tambimatu a boat with no name would sail out slowly to the midstream. Without (thanks be!) any Yaleen on board....

And a jolly night it was indeed. Music, talk, and singsongs — as deafening as ever. A lot of joshing, some kissing (and resort to a certain upstairs room for a six-way tangle), even a bit

of a brawl, though a halfhearted one. This time no Port Barbra women were skulking about the premises. I collected a hangover, which I nursed through most of the morning in my bunk; as did many of us.

At last I just had to empty my bowels. So I dragged myself up. I raided the galley for a bite of eel pie, then crept on deck, to lean on the rail and recover.

I decided that I, too, felt complacent.

Partly this was a consequence of the hangover: I had no desite to exert myself. Mainly it was due to being there once again on deck at Jangali dock, just as I'd been once before. It seemed as if nothing essential had changed, after all.

So I lazed about. Had lunch with the other walking wounded. Played several hands of cards, winning a few fins and losing them again. There was desultory talk about mounting a return expedition ashore that night, though no one was overly enthusiastic. The air was a hot muggy blanket. The sun boomed down on the river.

At around two o'clock the tall new signal tower to the north of Jangali began to flash. (Oh, yes, there *had* been little changes.)

Idly, I spelled out the message, which was in plain language.

A moment later I was not so idle.

"Tamath!" I screamed. "Boatmistress! Someone tell her to come!"

Minor commotions occurred on other vessels, too, as more people began to notice the flashing and pay heed.

Tamath was by my side in record time, sprinting from her cabin. She, too, stared. She had missed the start of the signal, but it didn't matter. It was soon being repeated. Briefly, Tamath hesitated between dashing to the lookout station where young Melesina — about the only person actually on duty — was copying the signal down. As the message sank in, she stayed by me....

"Urgent alert. Ex Umdala. Repeat onward. Black current withdraws upriver ex sea. Head current passes Umdala midday. Speed 17 lph. Wake upsets small craft. Head of current size of small hill. Look of giant croaker. River clear where head has passed. No current remains. Umdala endit."

Two hours since that signal had set out! The black current was withdrawing upstream at a rate of seventeen leagues per hour. Soon the "head" would be passing Firelight. A little over an hour later, Melonby.

Maybe something wild and terrible in the ocean had driven it upstream ... I doubted this. The current was winding itself back toward the Far Precipices, like some huge rope being winched in. And on the end of that black rope was the living head that had never been seen, or even guessed, in all our history! A head the size of a hill!

Tamath called to Boatswain Hali (no relation to the Hali of the *Sally Ar-*

gent) to send someone aloft with a spyglass to observe the midstream; Hali climbed the shrouds herself.

"Nothing can possibly have happened at Tambimatu," Tamath muttered to me. "Last night, I mean. Not to provoke this. Or we'd have heard by now. So has your precious Dr. Edrick doctored the current, after all?"

"How do I know? How can a current flow upriver, Tamath?"

"Ah, its substance is curious." She was quoting her Chapbook of the guild, not telling me anything new. Her voice was singsong. Her eyes looked glazed with shock. "It seems a liquid. Yet, it flows within itself, and is One. Like an oily sinew, like a tapeworm."

"A worm with a head, so it seems!"

"It doesn't really flow like water. Waves simply pass along it; it remains."

"Till now it did! Incantations aren't going to help us any, Boatmistress!" I spoke as sharply as a slap on the cheek.

She recoiled, then recovered herself. "No, of course not.... You're right."

"So is there a brain in its head? And eyes that see? And a mouth that feeds? And speaks? Maybe speaks!"

"Speaks," she repeated dully. "What could it say? Now that anybody can cross the river? Now that anyone can cross the river? Now that anyone can sail? The world's turning upside down...."

"It told me the world would turn on its hinges, on the day when it moved. Now it's happening. Today. Maybe Edrick didn't start this. Maybe the current decided long ago."

"What's going to *happen?*"

From the topgallant Hali called, "I can see ripples rushing all along the midstream water. It's moving, all right!" Hali ordered Zernia aloft to take over the watch, and began to climb down.

"What's going to happen, Tamath, is that it'll pass us here in Jangali. Unless it decides to halt halfway."

"If the head displaces enough water to upset small craft ... then we'd best slacken our moorings.... Or even put out, a hundred spans or so. Hali!" she shouted to the descending boatswain.

"Hang on," I interrupted. "It's withdrawing at seventeen leagues per hour. If it keeps on coming, it won't pass here til...." I calculated. "Um, tomorrow, around midnight. Maybe very early, the day after."

"Oh, yes, of course ... quite right."

"And I want to see it pass," I added. "From close by."

Hali had joined us by now. "Do you just?" Her tone was sarcastic. "We hear and obey. Right, Boatmistress, let's all jump to it and sail the *Blue Guitar* right out so that Yaleen here can get an eyeful!"

Tamath pursed her lips. "Yaleen has a ... special ... reason for wanting to be close. It may well be that we all *need* her to see what happens.... Hmm, yes, we'll probably sail."

Hali stared at us incredulously. She didn't know my past history. By the time the *Blue Guitar* had arrived in Spanglestream for the conclave, six weeks had passed since I'd swum ashore. The waves of gossip had slackened into tiny ripples.

"The crew won't want to get anywhere near *that!*" Hali protested.

"I'll speak to them. Tomorrow. Or tonight. In a nutshell, Yaleen here has crossed the current twice already. It knows her. She spent months on the west bank. And she got back."

"Oh," said Hali. She looked hurt. Because Tamath hadn't taken her into her confidence earlier. "Oh." If I'd been in Hali's boots, that was about all that I could have found to say.

Hali was deeply hurt; and because of this I could see she was very sore at me.

Tamath turned to me. "Isn't the current at its lowest ebb as the year changes? Surely it should have grown *more* sluggish with the drug — not less?"

"Yes, the drug would make it sluggish, at first. Then it would speed up." Just as Marcialla had sped up, rushing frenetically about her cabin.... "It would berserk."

Excluded from this exchange by ignorance, Hali looked even more resentful.

As the afternoon wore on, more signals came our way.

"Ex Firelight. Head passing. River clear downstream...."

"Ex Melonby...."

We might have stayed up half the night watching for signals — latterly, lantern flashes — spelling the retreat of the head upstream. However, Tamath ordered us all below quite early. The next night would be a long and risky one. She explained why; and stunned the crew with her explanation.

Going on for ten the following night, we were readying the *Blue Guitar* to sail, working by the light of our own lanterns and those on the dockside.

Dispute had broken out (not least from Hali) as to whether to risk a fine schooner in this enterprise. A little tub would be less of a loss, if loss there was to be. Though equally, a little tub might more easily flounder when that living hill rushed by.

Two of our crew had deserted, though Tamath was willing to consider them as only temporarily missing ashore.

And I was in the peculiar, ambiguous position of suddenly not being very popular, since I was the reason for this nocturnal jaunt to danger — while at the same time I was something of a miracle. From the way some of my boatsisters spoke, you'd have thought I was personally responsible for the present misconduct of the current.

We cast off. Slowly we sailed out under light canvas, to take up station.

* * *

We were about half way out when, in the darkness to the north, the powerful signal lantern began to wink. Tamath was loitering near me on the foredeck. I had been relieved of my ordinary duties; who could say what my extraordinary ones might be?

"Urgent alert. Ex Verrino Spire," I spelled.

It was the first time I'd ever seen such a callsign. So some accommodations had been reached between the river guild and the observers. Unless this was a spontaneous message, breaking into the chain of light.

"... Repeat onward. Explosion in town. Fire. Screaming. Confusion. Quayside appears under attack. Large rafts landing ex river. From west. Alert all towns: arm with any weapons to defend shore...."

Tamath clutched my arm savagely, hurting me. She seemed to imagine her fingertips were pressing words into me.

"It's the Sons," said I, wincing. "They've invaded Verrino...."

Sick at heart, I visualized the Sons of Adam rampaging through that lovely town, where in their eyes every woman was a witch. "Arm with any weapons," indeed! With knives and needles? With pitchforks and mattocks?

Tamath finally found her voice. "The head can have passed Verrino only fifteen hours ago! How could the west have rafts ready? And men, and weapons? Unless Edrick's plan worked! Unless he did poison the current! Damn you, Yaleen, for this thing you've done. *Damn you.* You told them how. And you've destroyed our lives!"

And at Verrino quay were berthed real river-going vessels, for the Sons to seize and press into service....

All of a sudden our world was cut in half.

It all seemed so abominably unfair. Only a while ago the whole river and my life had stretched before me, full of tantalizing distant towns, vistas, bright adventures, friends, lovers, boats, dreams. Anything whatever that was good, within the changelessly rich fabric.

It was all over now, forever, before it had really begun. I felt as though a giant hand had abruptly doused the sun and stars, and drained the river dry.

Because I felt so dry, I wept.

"Don't be such a baby!" sneered Tamath. "What way is this to greet your only friend, who's rushing to visit you? You'll need to see straight, to pat the worm's head."

"Damn it," I gasped. "This is *grief!* Don't you understand? How many of us have even known such grief before?"

"Congratulations, Yaleen. You're the bringer of grief." How bitter Tamath sounded.

And so the *Blue Guitar* continued onward toward my tryst with the head of the worm; while three hundred leagues distant, a war had begun.

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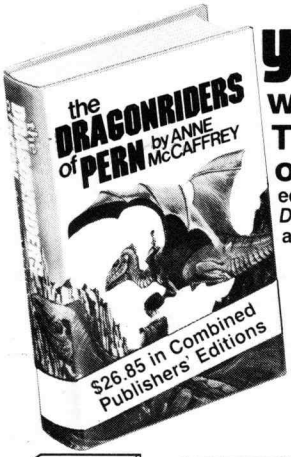

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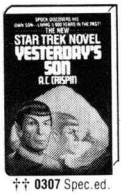

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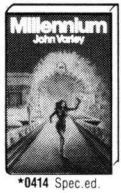

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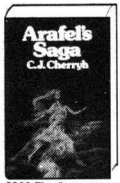

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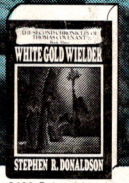

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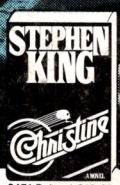

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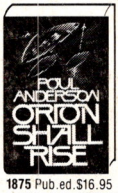

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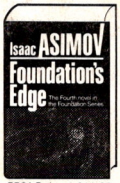

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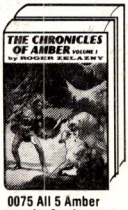

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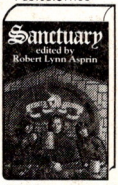

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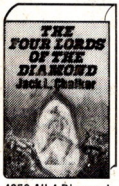

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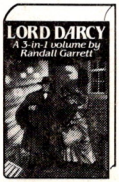

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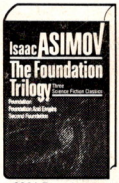

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